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High-Value Cyber Identities:

Radical Traditionalism of Black Gender Performance in Digital Spaces

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in African American Studies.

by

Shamora Alecia Drummond

2023

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

High-Value Cyber Identities:

Radical Traditionalism of Black Gender Performance in Digital Spaces

by

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Masters of Arts in African American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Safiya Umoja Noble, Chair

My thesis, entitled, “High-Value Cyber Identities: Radical Traditionalism of Black Gender Performance in Digital Spaces” investigates the rise of gendered content produced by cisgender heterosexual Black people who have been gaining popularity that reify society’s views on gender identity and gender performance. The political and economic climate that developed in the United States in 2020 due to the Coronavirus pandemic made way for radical movements such as the Black manosphere and the soft life movement among Black cisgender heterosexual identifying people in digital spaces. Through digital spaces, Black people who participate in this movement are able to reenvision their place in the gender hierarchy online.

The thesis of Shamora Alecia Drummond is approved.

Ugo Felecia Edu

Alden Young

Safiya Umoja Noble, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

*For my mom,
Who braved a new world for a better life*

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Introduction

Bored in the house and I'm in the house bored. We aren't supposed to leave the house unless we are getting essentials under the stay-at-home order that has been issued. It's for our own good to stop the spread of coronavirus. I feel trapped at every turn seeing countless people die from the disease every day and if that wasn't enough I have to witness Black people dying at every turn while the video of George Floyd being murdered by police is played over on an endless loop. When did life become a dystopian novel that seems to be only getting worse as the day goes on? I can't help but wonder if I'm next. Next to get infected or harmed by trigger-happy officers. I haven't been able to work since it shut down for being nonessential. It's hard not to become stir-crazy while being trapped in this tiny apartment feeling like the walls are caving in. There's no one to talk to and binging television got old after a month. It's all too much.

The only way to seek solace during this time is to scroll endlessly through social media. This is the only time when I don't feel alone and have a community where I can interact and be a spectator to the hordes of people experiencing the same things I am and being able to take part in the laughter and jokes. One platform could be boring if you stay on it long and I'll just keep switching back and forth so I can stay entertained. I'll go over to TikTok and learn the Savage dance challenge that's been going viral. Then go to YouTube to watch something on my recommended page. This video titled "Why You Can't Get a Man" looks interesting and after all, I'm stuck in the house, so I might as well watch. After watching this video I'm getting recommended more videos by this same creator and there are more videos like this one. At least I can waste my time watching these videos while I'm bored.

This scenario was the reality for many people in 2020 while they were stuck in the house. People accidentally stumbled across content via social media and they ended up in

recommendation chains that they couldn't get out of because they had come to believe everything they consumed to be true. Whether it was Q anon conspiracy theories, believing that the moon landing was filmed by Stanley Kubrick, or even believing that the pandemic was a hoax, people became susceptible to information that was swirling around because they had time to consume it all.

This thesis will focus on the rise of gendered content produced by cisgender heterosexual Black people who have been gaining popularity that reify society's views on gender identity and gender performance. I argue that the political and economic climate that developed in the United States in 2020 due to the Coronavirus pandemic made way for radical movements among Black cisgender heterosexual identifying people. The Black manosphere and soft life movement thrust themselves into the mainstream discussion to reenvision their place in the gender and racial hierarchy online.

People are constantly socialized into their gender roles in society and are continuously reconstructing gender and gender norms through their digital and IRL (in real life) selves. The internet among other social institutions socializes people into normative behavior and expectations of their perceived selves. Gender socialization often first occurs in the family structure sometimes before the child is born. This influences the child to perform their gender identity in the rigid parameters of societal standards. Traditional gender norms that are imposed onto people at an early age constrain us to perform a set of outdated ideals without question. Black people often receive socialization of constructions of gender from family and familial interactions and religion (Hill, 2002). According to Marlon Bailey and Matt Richardson Black churches are primary sites of the production of gendered common sense where a heteronormative gender performance is learned (Bailey and Richardson, 2019). Gendered common sense

articulates the understanding that everyone has a place in the world. Religion teaches that men should be providers and leaders while women should be submissive and docile. Black men's manhood comes from a place of structural vulnerability therefore there is a need for overcompensation and performative displays of manhood to gain power. This means that any gender variance such as feminine men, trans men, trans women, or gender-conforming people can be seen as a threat and challenges the ideas of Black manhood and how it conceptualizes heteronormative patriarchy.

Black women not being considered feminine has been the subject of videos and memes to denigrate Black women. The term misogynoir is important for analyzing videos and memes because it accurately surmises the targeted language that is utilized against Black women. The term coined by Moya Bailey is defined as, "the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in U.S. visual and digital culture" (Bailey, 2021). While Black women have been working to subvert negative stereotypes through the media, Black men are not only weaponizing them but also reifying them. They often exploit harmful stereotypes about Black women that have been utilized to fuel Black women's subjugation. Some of these harmful stereotypes stem from controlling images that have been named in Patricia Hill Collins's book *Black Feminist Thought*, specifically the Black matriarch/ the angry Black woman, and the benign image such as the Black lady. The Black matriarch image is employed by the a subgroup of the Black manosphere called the passport bros as a symbol of a challenge to patriarchal power, "The matriarch or overly strong Black woman has also been used to influence Black men's understanding of Black masculinity. Many Black men reject Black women as marital partners, claiming that Black women are less desirable than white ones because we are too assertive" (Collins, 1990).

Using a Black Feminist framework is integral to the analysis of these movements because it allows us to see how many of the oppressions plague Black people who participate in these movements and position themselves within their respective genders. Gender intersects with other systems of oppression such as race, class, and sexuality which are key factors in how gender gets defined. Articulated by the Combahee River Collective and coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality asserts that Black women suffer from multiple interlocking oppressions that open them up to new ways of suffering (Combahee River Collective, 1986). This makes the category of gender hard to contain within rigid parameters under white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Chapter one, “Yes, Everything is Linked to Slavery” goes over the history on how Black people negotiated their gender identity during enslavement. I also discuss the stereotypes shaping how these radical movements take hold in the psyches of Black people. This ultimately provides a backdrop on how the Black manosphere and the soft life movement gain and sustain their movements.

Chapter two, “An Incels Right to a Podcast: It’s Black Manosphere Time”, examines the rise of the subgroup of Black men in the Manosphere and why these men flock to these movements. The Manosphere is comprised of websites and social media groups united by the belief that men are oppressed victims of feminism (Dickel and Evolvi, 2022). The Black Manosphere congregates through podcasts, Twitter, and Youtube. All groups of the Manosphere subscribe to the “red pill” philosophy which claims that only a few men can see that women are not oppressed in society. The entry point of Black men being radicalized into the Black manosphere space stems from the famous Youtuber, Kevin Samuels. I also analyze a current movement on Tik Tok, the Passport Bros, that uses Kevin Samuels’s rhetoric to situate itself in

the growing Black Manosphere movement. I also address how harmful it can be for Black women when this rhetoric goes unchecked.

Chapter three, “When Modern Women Attack: Memes and Viral Content”, looks at the definition that constitutes a modern woman to a traditionalist. I also analyze the green line meme that has become a popular way to speculate how power is distributed and negotiated in heteronormative celebrity relationships. I discuss the viral hate campaign aimed at Megan Thee Stallion for daring to speak up for herself after she was harmed. I pay attention to the relationship between how Megan Thee Stallion is perceived and people’s decision to believe her male counterpart.

Chapter four “Dainty Dream Girl Fantasy”, will look at the Black woman-led movements on social media as it relates to gender. These gendered movements such as soft life in the U.S. concept attempt to construct, maintain, and reimagine Black women’s womanhood through social media but ultimately fall flat when it regurgitates similar points as the Black manosphere. I also discuss Patricia Hill Collins controlling images, primarily the angry Black woman stereotype, to help us understand what these movements are fighting back against.

Chapter One:

Yes, Everything Goes Back to Slavery

Black peoples gender identity has always been up for debate since the first enslaved African arrived in the United State in 1619. Enslavement rendered Black people as subhuman which shaped how they interacted with gender norms that were established by white supremacy. According to bell hooks, the gendered politics of slavery denied Black men access to manhood through the socialization of white norms that indicated that patriarchal masculinity was the only way to be a ‘man’. Black men could not be patriarchs under slavery because they couldn’t provide for and protect Black women. After slavery, they wanted to assume the role that they didn’t have access to before so they wanted Black women to conform to traditional gender norms such as being submissive and domestic so they could be recognized as patriarchs. However, this proved to be a difficult task considering that Black women have always been laborers who were integrated within the workforce since slavery and have repeatedly been shut out of womanhood similarly to Black men with masculinity because of racist societal values.

Under the system of slavery in the United States, Black women were stripped of their humanity and womanhood. In Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”, she posits that Black women underwent a process of ungendering in the Middle Passage where Black bodies were erased of gender (Spillers, 1987). Enslaved Africans were not allowed to have a gendered identity because they were not seen as human but as property. However, in this genderless- or gender limbo, enslaved people found themselves, enslaved Black women were at the center of gendered violence inflicted upon them by slaveowners, “Enslaved black women were simultaneously gendered and ungendered through the objectification of their anatomy, whether in the service of white women’s health or being rendered genderless laborers and property”(Bailey,

2021). On another hand, bell hooks argued that enslaved Africans were gendered especially in the type of work they did and it was done to devalue Black womanhood. Black women were made to labor alongside Black men in the fields but Black men did not perform labor that was seen as “female” unless it was a form of punishment made to humiliate them, “ ...there were many tasks enslaved African men would not perform because they regarded them as “female” work” (hooks, 2004). Womanhood for enslaved Black women was unattainable and often weaponized against them when it would suit the needs of the white slave owner. For example, it would be incentivized with dresses, ribbons, or anything that could emphasize their womanhood from slaveowners when they had children (hooks, 2014).

The Moynihan Report in 1965 culminated and solidified the strained relations between Black women and Black men. The Moynihan Report argued that Black people were culturally deviant because Black women had steady work and ran the household while Black men struggled to find jobs. Black women emasculated Black men by “failing to be submissive, dependent, and feminine women” (Collins, 1990). The report has often been cited in many Black manosphere videos to prove that the Black community must go back to traditional values that enable a man to lead.

Chapter Two:

An Incels Right to a Podcast: It's Black Manosphere Time

*“But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune
in the world as there are pretty women to deserve them”*

–Jane Austen, Mansfield Park

The manosphere is a series of social media groups that subscribe to the ideology that men are victims of feminism and promote violent misogynistic rhetoric with ties to the far right. Throughout all subgroups of the manosphere they subscribe to the “red pill” philosophy, a reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix*, that claims that only a few men can see the alleged truth that women are not oppressed within society (Dickel and Evolvi, 2022). The manosphere has existed for as long as the internet has been accessible to the public but they used to congregate within their own spaces that were niche. Over the years, the manosphere has been rising in popularity due to multiple factors such as fourth-wave feminism starting in the early 2010s, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States—Trump emboldened far-right sentiment and his election prompted the Women's March, and culminating with the viral hashtag, #metoo, that was created by a Black woman, Tarana Burke, and encouraged women to come forward with the sexual violence they face. These events created the perfect storm for the manosphere to become visible on social media platforms by criticizing #metoo narratives from victims. The manosphere is alluring to men who feel like they are losing their social power because of the feminist movement. These men actively try to reestablish traditional gender dynamics of patriarchy. This is no doubt why Black men identified and created a subsection of the manosphere to address their concerns about feeling emasculated by Black women.

Introducing Kevin Samuels

Kevin Samuels, a famous Youtuber, dating coach, and traditional value pusher represents the pushing of manosphere ideas into the mainstream and making it accessible for Black people who were casually scrolling on their social media pages. After becoming popular in 2020, he is considered to be the most influential Black manosphere content creator with concepts ranging from traditionalism, degradation of Black women as a form of tough love, and offering dating and lifestyle advice to Black women on how they could bag a 'high-value man'. The centering of women, especially Black women is notable because he is associated with and loved by his Black male audience who see him as a voice for them. His use of Black women as subjects will be revisited later on in the essay through an analytical look at selected videos of his. While Samuels claims that only ten percent of Black men are 'high value' this doesn't matter for his audience because they see themselves as future high-value men or are delusional to believe they are already there. This is similar to the ideas of capitalism where it conditions people to believe that they future millionaires so they can defend the actions of capitalism instead of questioning it. His popularization came during a time when there was high economic despair from the Coronavirus pandemic and people were looking for a way to escape their socioeconomic strife by trying to perform traditional patriarchal masculinity or perform their 'divine femininity'.

Through looking at his social media, Kevin Samuels saw himself as an image consultant, lifestyle coach, and most importantly an influencer. As can be deduced from the name, the job of an influencer is to influence people by telling them how to spend their money, how to think and what to believe, and ways to gain knowledge about a topic of the influencer's expertise. Influencers are often micro niche internet celebrities that don't escape their side of the internet, especially with how many different internets there are within the algorithms of social media

networks that make your online community echo chambers. Considering that TMZ, The New York Times, and NBC news organizations that function outside of the Black space of the internet wrote about Samuels' passing in May 2022 shows how much impact he had propelling manosphere content outside his audience..

Samuels passed away in 2022 but his impact was evident on Black Twitter after the news broke of his death subsequently made him a trending topic for two days. Whether celebrating or mourning his death via social media, people saw it as an end to telling the truth about women and as a blow to the movement of traditionalism. The meaning of Kevin Samuels to the people who followed him is undeniable. This became evident in March 2023 after his family released a memorial for him via his Youtube channel entitled 'Celebrating Life'. It gained over 400k views signaling that this movement is still as viable as ever even moving beyond the creator. At the time of writing, Kevin Samuels had 1.74 million YouTube subscribers and 1.2 million Instagram followers showing that he was a force to be reckoned with. Black men were citing him as prolific, a truth-sayer, and a father figure for many Black men because he taught them how to perform masculinity properly.

Within the manosphere, Samuels functioned as a pickup artist (PUA), "Pick-up Artists portray themselves as dating coaches, and in doing so often dehumanize and abuse women..."(Dickel and Evolvi, 2022). PUAs thrive off the meaning of masculinity, self-help culture, and the notion that women are only motivated by money and deserve what they get (Sugiura, 2021). In his video titled, "Are Men Being Silenced?", he says that when he made self-help content focused and centered around Black men no one watched. When he shifted his efforts under the guise of 'helping' women the videos went viral. The reason his content featuring Black men receiving advice didn't get popular is that Black men don't want to see

other Black men get humbled especially if they could identify similar qualities in themselves. Humbling by Black men is reserved for Black women especially if done in public view. While Samuels was not the first or the last to degrade Black women on the internet, he used this as his primary source of gaining popularity. He captured the essence of what the Black manosphere, regular Black men, and Black women who are invested in patriarchy love and resonate with, anti-blackness spewed toward Black women. This not only increased Samuels's visibility within popular Black internet culture it was a gateway for the Black manosphere to take off. This spurred an increase in this kind of content from Black men and women in the form of podcasts, TikToks, Youtube videos, and thought inducing scenarios made for Black Twitter enjoyment and grief.

Joy of Exploiting Black Women for Media Fodder

Kevin Samuels focus and critiques on the Black women within his videos helped boost popularity among Black men. Through his content, he sought to empower men by humiliating women and this is evident that a majority of the guests in his videos are women who he always talks down to. His audience would then see this as retribution for the experiences they had with women and justified this as a necessary good for Black families to flourish. I will critically analyze three videos from Kevin Samuels's YouTube channel and see what messaging/vocabulary he uses, the impact of the video, and how the audience interacts with the content. While looking at videos he made in 2020 that pushed him into being a known figure in the Black digital space would be conducive to my argument of the pandemic contributing to his rise, I think that looking at videos leading up to his death in 2022. These videos captured a moment in time where his career was still growing powerful and demonstrate that he wasn't just an anomaly. By anomaly, I take as an example the Verzuz Battles that everyone was watching at

home in 2020 but has then fizzled off in the background due to concerts being available for audiences again. There has been nothing that could quell the desire for people who find themselves involved with the Black manosphere. Samuels represents a cultural mainstay in the Black manosphere space and like his followers refer to him, the godfather of the content that is coming out after him.

The first video I will be analyzing was mentioned earlier in the essay entitled, “Are Men Being Silenced?” This was posted on March 12, 2022, and garnered over 261k views with the caption “Where can men speak freely without being shouted down?”. Samuels argues that Black women have a variety of platforms, “Madam Noir, Essence, Ebony, Grapevine, and Bossip” while Black men don’t have the same opportunities (Samuels, 2022). There is no basis within his claims and seems like this was said to appease the Black men who feel like they don’t have a voice. This video doesn’t center on the manosphere pick-up artist tropes that will be seen in later videos but this directly addresses the fears that Black men have about being unheard and overshadowed by Black women within the media. This fear of Black men being silenced plays into the manosphere who believe that women are not oppressed in society because of the feminist movement that prioritizes women’s plight in society. There is also an undercurrent within the video that is being discussed which is that Black women aren’t listening to Black men, “They’ve been speaking in their houses in their lives, black men have been speaking for my entire lifetime. Y’all aren’t listening” (Samuels, 2022). This refers back to the Moynihan Report which placed Black men and Black women in opposition to one another and portrayed the Black family as deviant because Black women were seen as leaders within the household which in turn emasculated Black men.

Feeding into these same tropes that the Moynihan Report brought forth, Black men and Black women were placed in opposition to each other during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. The messaging from the protests tend to focus on Black men being killed instead of all Black people being affected by law enforcements use of excessive force. On the other hand, Black Lives Matter, which was created by Black women, had a messaging issue among its supporters only associating police violence inflicted on Black people with Black men. This led to Black feminists having to activate the hashtag #sayhername to shine a light on the violence that Black women face with law enforcement going back to Sandra Bland and progressing to the most notable Black woman who lost her life in 2020, Breonna Taylor. This shows that even within a movement created by Black women there had to be a separate movement to address the erasure of Black women and how patriarchy factors into Black men being the focus of the movement. This begs the question of who is being silenced and who gets support from people rallying around them.

There were 15k likes on this video and about three thousand comments showing the high amount of interaction by the viewers. One comment from user @princewet said, “Kevin badly gives us a voice that ripples through the stiff layers of the feminist infrastructure. A voice that if listened to will provide a brighter future for families”. A common idea within the manosphere is that men have lost their “rightful” place in society due to strides by women to gain equality among the sexes. This also proves that Kevin Samuels and his followers are fighting back against the rise of fourth-wave feminism. Another comment under this video by the user @thekobe42 echoes the red pill philosophy held by the manosphere that women aren’t really oppressed in society.

“Women in general can’t deal with constructive criticism. It’s immediately viewed as hate speech or toxic. What’s happening with men is an awakening and the misinformation and misdirection is over and they can’t handle that. Men get better results with the intention of being respected. Great work as always KS!”(Samuels, 2022). This viewer sees Kevin Samuels as enlightening the masses by calling out women and spreading what they see as the truth about the feminist movement. They truly believe that women are overreacting when they speak about the harm experienced at the hands of men and seek retribution through viewing spreading Kevin Samuels videos and talking points on social media.

The second video entitled, “Are Modern Single Mothers Selfish?” was published on March 27th, 2022 with over three hundred thousand views. In this video, Samuels’ is speaking to a young woman who says she wants to take time away from dating to put her and her daughter first. Samuels characterizes this as selfish and pushes back on this because he sees this as an act of defiance because she isn’t preparing herself to be a wife and asks the question, “What are you doing in the single years that is helping you become a wife?” (Samuels, 2022). This question is what differentiates a modern woman from a traditional woman that Samuels says high-value men seek. A modern woman chooses independence and acknowledges her need to be selfish which is considered a masculine trait. A traditional woman is feminine and puts her man’s and family’s needs over hers, “The kind of men that could afford a family of three in a middle-class upper-middle-class lifestyle isn’t putting up with a modern woman. They want traditional feminine women who are not selfish. They are selfless. They put themselves last, men first, and family second” (Samuels, 2022). Samuels and his audience see women and children as aids to define what manhood is to them. The notion that women must always keep in mind the man they will eventually marry in the future removes autonomy and agency and encloses them in a prison

of patriarchy. Samuels goes on further to say that independent and defiant women are fed the lie that they can marry any high-value man they want and that's why women don't get the man they want.

The final video that I analyze is, "So I'm Supposed to Settle for a Regular Type Dude?!" which was posted in April 2022. This was his highest-rated video of 2022 garnering over 2.5 million views and 75k likes. The title question was posed by the subject of the video who is a Black woman who sought dating help from Kevin Samuels which appears to take place in a Zoom meeting. In the most dehumanizing fashion Samuels begins by asking the woman for her height, weight, and dress size, and to rank her fresh face. After this line of questioning, he says she is overweight with two children and a chest tattoo which doesn't make her an ideal partner for a man with money. All this happens within the first two minutes. Continuing, he says that he has no problem telling women to die alone if they feel that just having a man isn't enough and men need to make their life easier. After his speech about why high-value men shouldn't settle for "average at best" Black women, the Black woman in this video asks, "If I wanted a high-value man then what should I do?" and Kevin Samuels uttered the most horrific and degrading answer, "Be reincarnated. You can't get one" (Samuels, 2022). This encapsulated what makes him so popular which is how he talks down to women and isn't scared to take them down a peg.

The men in the comments are probably within the same attractiveness and social status as this woman but yet his audiences see her as someone that is beneath them. The viewers in the comments rate the woman's attractiveness and admire Kevin Samuels for being patient with her supposed delusions of getting a high-value man. The viewer that goes by the name @samuelachampong commented saying, "We are living in a world where a 1/10 woman has an

ego higher than the sun. This is crazy”, this comment had over 22k likes. Another commenter, @RJFrance said “Rip Kevin, this woman was a 2/10 best and you held your frame without losing your temper to such stupid female logic. May your teaching help all the future vine swingers out there” (Samuels, 2022). The comments under this video are in the same vein of being malicious to a stranger over the internet because she feels like she deserves a man that’s better than what she’s used to. One question that came to mind when watching this video along with his others that have real-life Black women participating is what happens when the camera turns off and these women have to go back to their lives knowing that there’s an audience of people humiliating them and speaking about their appearance.

Kevin Samuels had an undeniable impact on the Black manosphere and serves as a guide for many other movements to spring up through new leaders. This leads us to the subsection of the Black manosphere, The Passport Bros.

The Kevin Samuels Cinematic Universe

The Passport Bros movement has been the most recent example of how Kevin Samuels’s ideology has spread to create other subgroups that have evolved out of the Black manosphere. The Passport Bros attempt to remove the agency of Black American women and Latinx women through their subset of the Black manosphere which promotes the stereotypical performance of gender on social media by encouraging sex tourism in the global south. The main talking points have been stereotypes that are imposed on Black women by saying that they have too much attitude and they are too infected by being a modern woman. When I think of Passport Bros my mind goes to Snoop Dogg’s music video for his song *Beautiful* featuring Pharrell Williams. The video serves as a perfect introduction to the beliefs of passport bros. The video and the subsequent commentary that it brought forth served as an advertisement to go to Brazil. Its

depiction of half-naked ‘exotic’ women gives the idea that Brazilian women can’t keep their hands off Black American men even though in the back of their minds the video is supposed to serve as a fantasy for the audience.

This is the main argument that passport bros have cited in their videos that Black women are unable to be submissive and conform to traditional gender roles under patriarchy. To find love they say they must abandon Black American women for women in Latin America who they perceive as holding traditional values. This allows them to engage in gender dynamics and play out their patriarchal fantasy that they can’t get from Black women. According to Gezinski, men who travel to the global south are often motivated by a fantasy experience where they exercise their power regarding gender, race, class, and nationality (Gezinski, 2016).

One TikTok by the username Rick Life (@byrichlife) is the most prominent passport bro page which has over 24.2k followers and has garnered 602.2k likes on his videos. On his TikTok profile, all his videos revolve around the passport bros movement. In a video he specifically cites Kevin Samuels in the caption saying, “Kevin Samuels advice Was trying to help y’all NOW Modern Woman of the West Made the Passport Bro movement NECESSARY”. Samuels, in his death, serves as a jumping-off point for many of the Black manosphere creators.

In a TikTok posted by @byrichlife on November 27, 2023, entitled and captioned Episode 6, “Passport Movement Explained... men with options choosing TRADITION”. The video features the creator who is laying down on his partner’s lap, a partner who appears to be a Black woman and whom we should understand as having been found when he traveled abroad. The video contains edits of various other people explaining the passport bros movement. This video alone has 10.6k likes which proves that this small internet community is gaining traction. The following is one of the sound bites from the video that defines this community:

“The reality is that many of these men who are choosing to travel abroad are high value six figure men that many of you modern women claim you want with the caveat being that many of these men who choose to exercise their options and travel abroad are traditional men who are in search of traditional women and who want nothing to do with modern women and their feminist ideologies and mindsets. Instead, these men are choosing to go to other countries to meet women who understand what it means to be a wife and help me. Women who understand what it means to reflect and respect his values and his standards. Women who are feminine and submissive and not combative, are traditional men in search of traditional women”(Life, 2022).

The use of the word ‘modern’ indicates that these men see women from Latin America as colonial subjects that are not included in modernity. These men don’t think that the feminist movement has made its way there to influence their culture or way of thinking. Especially, the way they flaunt their American passport within different Tik Toks to advertise the passport bros movement. Black men perceive themselves as privileged in these spaces because they are Americans and it is assumed that they have money in Latin America, “This privilege goes beyond white privilege to encompass gender, national, and class privilege as well”(Williams, 2013). In another TikTok by the same creator, he inserted a clip of Dominican women expressing that they love American men and equating them to gods just because of their national origin.

The fetishization of Afro-Latinx women is not a new thing and it is certainly not only a Black man thing. Brazil’s tourist industry advertises itself as a country that offers sexual attractions through pamphlets and videos of women telling the audience that they will find love in Brazil and often using images of Afro-Brazilians for their promotion (Williams, 2013).

Websites that advertise sex tourism will have an option that is called the total girlfriend

experience where women play into foreign men's fantasy of wanting to feel desired (Gezinski, 2016). Williams uses sexual economy as a framework for how sex is no longer private but is within the intersections of economic systems and social life. These tourism advertisement videos shows how tourists treat women in Brazil as objects of desire instead of people. Passport bros often argue that their movement is not promoting sex tourism but their videos often fall into the stages of "pre-tour narrative" that Williams lays out. The passport bros videos are also categorized as preconceptions of the destination from the media of the accessibility of Afro-Brazilians or Afro-Latinx women (William, 2013).

The idea that women who live in Latin America and the Caribbean are not "tainted" by Western values is a myth promoted to exoticize those women. There have been transnational movements like the *Marcha das Vadias* (SlutWalk) that directly address the sexual violence that women specifically Black Brazilian women face in Bahia. One Black women's group from Curitiba wrote a manifesto that seeks to rally Black women to join and makes it a point that feminism isn't only for the white elite but also the poor Black working class, " We are hypersexualized; we are the 'color of sin'; we are the ones who are just for 'fucking' and for labor... [W]e are the cheapest meat at the market" (Davis, 2019). This manifesto wants Black Brazilian women to acknowledge a stereotype and take it to reappropriate for themselves so they can take control over their bodies. Other movements in the region are the *Julho das Pretas* (July of the Black Women) and *Marcha das Mulheres Negras contra o Racismo, a Violência, e pelo Bem Viver* which all seek to address the struggles of Afro-Brazilian women. The passport bros believe that Latin America is a static place unaffected by global movements and that all women in Latin America hold traditional values. This comes down to the fact that Black American men

tend to fetishize and exoticize Latin American women as the Other who exist outside of the global cultural landscape.

Chapter Three:

When Modern Women Attack:

Memes and Other Viral Content

Internet memes have been an accessible way for regular social media users to participate in the creation of content without it being at the center of a podcast or a Youtube video. Memes are a way to easily consume, contrast, and affirm gender dynamics that could be masqueraded as humor. Limor Shifman argues in *Memes of Digital Culture*, that memes are political and reveal the social construction of power (Shifman, 2014). This can be observed in memes and digital content in Black spaces which often use stereotypes of Black women as their source of inspiration. But this use of stereotypes of Black women as fodder for content hasn't only occurred in digital spaces.

Bailey points out that cisgender straight Black men such as Martin Lawrence, Tyler Perry, and Jamie Foxx use caricatures of Black women in their movies, television shows, and comedy to mock and berate them as they dress up and pretend to be Black women (Bailey, 2021). They rely on anti-Black white supremacist views in their humor to emphasize Black women's lack of femininity and undesirability for audiences who understand that under the costume is a Black man who is criticizing Black women. This act of minstrelsy has transferred into digital spaces such as Vine, Instagram, Youtube, and TikTok where Black men use Black women for comedic effect, "Laughing at Black women through the artifice of drag provides a socially acceptable outlet for misogynoir and for the entertainers who utilize the medium, a proven path to more visibility and success" (Bailey, 2021). Similar to what Kevin Samuels did on his platform. The misogynoir faced by Black women in digital content has real-world implications because these images can be spread all over the world at a faster rate on the internet. This is a cause for concern

when thinking about racialized and gendered harassment that Black women face daily at the hands of people who have only observed Black people in the digital space. The drag that is often put on by cisgender Black men contributes to the harm that Black trans and nonbinary people face when presenting in a way that is not seen as acceptable or gender normative. Black men who perform their skits in drag always have tell tale sign that they only take on this look for comedic effect. For example, they have facial hair while portraying women or deepening their voice. Black trans and nonbinary people who often push back on normative gender presentation are always met with critique on how to present that fits into what society deems as acceptable. Having insight into how Black women are seen on social media could help pursue why the Black manosphere often sees Black women as a threat that needs to be humbled.

One of the most viral memes that bubbled up in Black digital spaces within the last couple of years is the green line test which analyzes the power within celebrity relationships. The original meme features Jada Pinkett Smith and Will Smith who appear to be at an awards show posing for a picture during a commercial break. To the average eye, the picture captures a lovely couple but to the people that assume the Smiths relationship dynamics, this image captures an inverse of gender roles. In the meme image, Jada Pinkett Smith's position in the seat is laid back and comfortable while sitting in a style of sitting traditionally associated with men/masculinity. Her legs open asserting her confidence and defying gender expectations. This is labeled as 'legs open' and 'pussy facing the world' with a triangle graphic placed directly between her legs. Pinkett Smith's facial expression contains a self-assured smug smirk that seemingly says that she knows something that you don't but the label within the meme boils down this expression to 'not smiling' which invokes an ideal that women have to smile to perform this idea of beauty and happiness within their lives.

The opposite is seen with Will Smith who is feminized for his pose in the picture. Will Smith has his legs crossed which is a traditional feminine way of sitting as a way to perform modesty and the meme labels this as ‘cock shame’. The green lines that are drawn on the picture note how Will Smith leans into his wife instead of the other way around to prove that he’s more in love with her. For this meme format, Pinkett Smith performs masculinity while her husband performs a role that is reserved often for women around shame.

This same meme format has been used to criticize Rihanna and ASAP Rocky’s March 2023 British Vogue cover. The editorial picture of Rihanna and her partner, ASAP Rocky, carrying their baby has the signature green lines drawn over the Vogue cover to show that Rihanna carries the power in the relationship. The meme posits that Rihanna is a strong, dominant, and masculine woman who is the leader. Rihanna doesn’t smile in the picture but rather maintains direct eye contact with the camera which makes an intense connection with the person viewing the photo. ASAP Rocky is behind Rihanna holding her hand while carrying and kissing their baby. The lines indicate that Rocky is a submissive, follower, nurturing, and feminine man because Rihanna is leading him as he performs the duty of caring for their baby. The lines argue that Rihanna holds the power in this relationship because ASAP Rocky has taken on the feminized role of being nurturing to his son. In traditional heteropatriarchal relationships, the roles of Rihanna and ASAP Rocky would be switched to adhere to gender roles where the woman is nurturing the children and the man has taken on the leadership role.

Both examples of the green line test meme directly play on what people know about these celebrity relationships. Over the years Jada Pinkett Smith and Will Smith have been forthcoming about the nature of their marriage on Pinkett Smith’s Facebook Talk show, *Red Table Talk*. In 2020, Will Smith made an appearance on the show to address the rumors about Jada Pinkett

Smith cheating with R&B singer August Alsina. During the talk show, Will Smith appeared vulnerable during the show by crying and making it a point that he will not be divorcing his wife. This event caused heaps of misogynistic and sexist comments aimed at Pinkett Smith via social media to avenge Will Smith. This was used to illustrate that Jada Pinkett Smith had more power within the relationship seeing how she was the one who cheated and forgave something that is usually reserved for men. The gender dynamics in the green line test went after Rihanna and ASAP Rocky's relationship because between the two Rihanna is the most celebrity and appears to have more money and relevance. To fans and social media users, this relationship is uneven because the man is supposed to be the breadwinner while the woman is used as an accessory but this is not the circumstances of the relationship.

Another example of gender dynamics could be found when we look at the treatment of Megan Thee Stallion after she was shot. Hip Hop is misogynistic, am I right? Right. Since its conception, hip-hop music has contained performative displays of machismo to over-inflate one's manhood for other men to respect while rapping misogynistic lyrics and promoting the sexualized image and objectification of Black women by its artists. In recent years, with the influx of female rappers reclaiming their sexuality in an inherently sexist industry and reframing the narrative there is still room for improvement.

In the summer of 2020, prominent female rapper Megan Thee Stallion also known as Megan Pete was shot by fellow rapper Tory Lanez whose real name is Daystar Peterson. This event caused a tsunami of misinformation throughout black social media about the 'truth' of what happened to Megan Thee Stallion that night which led to targeted violent hate-filled messages being sent to her. The police helicopter video that was released the night of the shooting showed Meg Thee Stallion limping back and forth following the commands of police

officers as blood spilled from the gunshot wound in her foot is traumatizing and makes apparent how police show a lack of care for victims of violent situations. Even with her silence not speaking about what happened to her automatically made people think she was a liar eventually even after breaking her silence and naming who caused her harm people still didn't believe her over the accused Tory Lanez's account of what happened that night.

Victims of harm must fit into a small box for them to be seen as victims. Megan Thee Stallion didn't get extended the status of the victim even though she was harmed because she was not the perfect victim and how people perceived her. Her identity as a ratchet Black woman, whose body is not coded as skinny but sexualized, and who portrays herself as being hard in her raps marked her as being not deserving of sympathy. Nikki Lane defines ratchet as "... a set of behaviors which are not socially acceptable or appropriate under Black middle-class ideologies as well as within white supremacist ideologies"(Lane, 2021). Lane extends this definition of ratchet to Anita Hill for speaking out against Supreme Court Justice, Clarence Thomas in 1992. The very act of speaking out against a Black man who has caused you harm is considered deviant and not within the Black middle class and white supremacist values. Megan doesn't adhere to the politics of respectability because she is comfortable speaking about her sexuality in her music and dresses in minimal clothing while performing which renders her to a line of questioning before they can allow her the space to grieve. Megan Thee Stallion's body is read masculine because she stands tall at 5'11 with an athletic body and isn't considered dainty or feminine which leaves little space for people to believe that she was attacked. In an interview with Rolling Stone, she touches on why she became a target of vitriol on social media, "And I don't know if people don't take it seriously because I seem strong. I wonder if it's because of the way I look. Is it because I'm not light enough? Is it because I'm not white enough? Am I, not the

shape? The height? Because I'm not petite? Do I not seem like I'm worth being treated like a woman?" (Madarang, 2022). This highlights how traditional values that the Black manosphere argues for affect people which person gets sympathy and which Black people matter the most. Megan Thee Stallion was made into a villain when she was the victim.

Lanez was known for his 2016 hit song, *Say It*, and started doing Instagram Lives that he started a couple of months at the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic named Quarantine Radio. He wasn't a popular or recognizable rapper like Drake or Kanye West or someone who had a large devoted fanbase like Nicki Minaj's Barbs or Beyonce's Bey Hive so it was surprising how many people rallied behind him after the shooting took place ultimately taking his side and choosing to believe what he was telling the media. It was obvious that people who were on Lanez's side were there because they saw him as a hero that took on the growing force that was Megan Thee Stallion and knocked her down a peg by exposing her as a liar despite evidence that she was harmed but this isn't purely about her.

Megan by her own account wanted to protect Tory Lanez the night of the shooting because she was scared that if law enforcement found out they had a gun in their car they might shoot especially with the upheaval of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. She told police officers that she cut her foot on glass and refused to reveal who shot her. This decision is often why people choose not to believe that she was shot and specifically shot by Tory Lanez to be a lie. Even when Megan went on Instagram Live to show her healing gunshot wound people still discredit her. This case that was used for social media fodder illustrates that people often pick and choose which Black life matters and which one could be disregarded.

Social media accounts frequented by Black social media users like The Shade Room, Hollywood Unlocked, and DJ Akademiks on Twitter contributed to the misogynoir that was

aimed at Megan Thee Stallion in the aftermath of the shooting. Adding insult to injury, Drake, arguably the most famous and recognizable rapper in the world interjected himself in the conversation via his lyrics on his collaboration album, *Her Loss*, with 21 Savage in 2022. On the song 'Circo Loco' he rapped "This bitch lie about getting shots, but she still a stallion" a double entendre saying that Megan Thee Stallion lied about getting shot similarly to how women lie about getting butt injections to enhance the size of their butts for aesthetic purposes. Drake manages to use his sad soft boy persona to conceal his misogynistic lyrics to make it palatable to audiences. Megan Thee Stallion addressed this lyric via a tweet saying, "Stop using my shooting for clout bitch ass niggas! Since when tf is it cool to joke abt a woman getting shot? You niggas especially RAP NIGGAS ARE LAME! Ready to boycott bout shoes and clothes but dog pile on a Black woman when she says one of y'all homeboys abused her" (Madarang, 2021). While calling out the hypocrisy that's in the hip-hop industry she also touches on the fact that some of the male rappers reserve protection for their friends knowing they cause harm but are willing to stand behind them no matter what. While Megan is given no grace or sympathy for what she's gone through publically showing only some lives are more valuable than others.

Jada Pinkett Smith, Rihanna, and Megan Thee Stallion represent the modern women that the Black Manosphere and their subscribers criticize and demonize. They aren't defined by the men in their lives and have their own identity that doesn't prioritize the men they choose as partners. They live their lives unconcerned and unencumbered by what men think of them. Modern women aren't willing to negotiate who they are for the sake of a man which redefines what feminine and masculine traits that traditionalists ascribe to the gender binary. The hybridity makes them and other women who choose this path dangerous to the audience that listens to Kevin Samuels and other variations of misogynistic content online.

Chapter Four:

Divest, Divest, Divest, and Soft Life the Rest

*Tired of seein' all these, all these
Spanish and these white bitches
Livin' they soft life with they feet kicked up
And glass in hand, bills is paid, thanks to the man
Know how to lead and he got a plan
Faithful and help round the house
And with the kid, could it be a reality from me and mine?*

– *Hardlife, Summer Walker*

Having a soft life is often reserved for non-Black women who can use the stereotypes for their advantage but because of the disdain of the stereotypes that are assigned to Black women, they are often not given the space to show all facets of their identity. While keeping in mind the passport bros efforts there is competition between Black women and Latin American women that is brought on by Black men. This competition also gets reinforced when examining who gets extended womanhood.

The exclusive club of womanhood is a difficult one to gain entrance into even if you fit all the criteria. To quote the Isiah Thomas iconic meme, “I don’t know what went into that process. I met the criteria to be selected but I wasn’t”. Though we do know the criteria that are assigned to womanhood thanks to the cult of true womanhood. According to bell hooks, the attributes expected of women were “modesty, sexual purity, innocence, and a submissive manner”, attributes that enslaved women couldn’t attain. Enslaved Black women and girls did not get to have a sense of purity and innocence because they would be robbed by the white overseer or owner due to rape or sexual assault, “The devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery...” (hooks, 2014). After slavery, black women often tried to emulate white women so they could reestablish the

womanhood that they lost at the hands of slavery. We see this reoccurring during the soft life movement because we see Black women using attributes of the cult of true womanhood. They position themselves as dainty, dressing modestly, and being submissive to their boyfriends/husbands. This will be further articulated in the analysis of the soft life movement.

Social media can be used to disseminate information on a global scale, Black women can utilize these platforms to their advantage by using them to subvert negative stereotypes. Visibility is perfect for a movement that is trying to dispel stereotypes of Black women by painting them to be dainty snowflakes. Moya Bailey's book, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* argues that Black women creating new content are a form of digital resistance through challenging problematic images functions as self-preservation and harm reduction. Could the soft life movement be a form of digital resistance that seeks to minimize institutional harm? It would be idealistic to expect Black women participating in this movement are doing so for the betterment of the group instead of realistically analyzing this movement that promotes individualistic actions that could potentially address systemic problems instead of interrogating the system in the first place. This will be further explored in the analysis of the themes of the selected viral material. While I don't think these women consider themselves Black feminists this movement could be seen as a liberatory way that Black women self-define themselves as a way to mitigate the oppressions they encounter.

Soft Life is an aesthetic developed by Nigerian influencers on the social media app, TikTok, for living a life of leisure, comfort, low stress, and self-care (Hargrove, 2022). The Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and the social unrest that followed created the perfect environment for the aesthetic to thrive. The pandemic forced people to work remotely, giving them time to reevaluate their lives before the pandemic. During this time, they could prioritize

themselves and seek comfort in times of turmoil. Through this trend, they want to opt into femininity generally reserved for white women.

Some within the movement argue that the soft life movement's meaning has been co-opted from this low-stress life of leisure to being Black women wanting to capitalize on their femininity to find men of high-class status. Hashtags that are generally associated with this movement are #blackgirlluxury, #hypergamy, #devinefemineenergy, and #traditionalvalues. This movement however it started has been transformed into a way to push traditional values, a way to find "proper" men to date all while being a Black woman. There are clear similarities between the soft life movement and the same ideals that Kevin Samuels pushed on his social media.

Historically, black women didn't have access to womanhood because of slavery. In participating in the soft life movement they try to abandon and dispel the stereotypical images of Black women's womanhood. Namely, the strong Black woman or the angry Black woman stereotype is highlighted. The strong Black woman trope comes from perceptions that Black women are determined, self-sacrificing, and willing to do what they need to support their families. This has traces going back to slavery where this trope was used to dehumanize and separate Black women from their gender by saying they were stronger than white women. Patricia Hill Collins's examined the various controlling images that serve to undermine and influence ideas of Black womanhood. The controlling images that Collins laid out are dynamic and can evolve for new forms of control. For example, the Black matriarch has evolved to include the strong Black woman stereotype where Black women are called out for being unfeminine because they are assertive and aggressive (Collins, 1990).

Notably, these images are the main attack points on social media when speaking about Black women for Black men and women alike. Soft life is not something that I would consider a

controlling image but rather a benign one such as the Black lady which is associated with positive characteristics such as being highly educated and high achievers. The image of the Black lady also interacts with this concept of them being able to play out their fantasy of patriarchy because this image builds upon the Black matriarch. The Black lady is considered to be a ‘modern’ woman who is highly educated and has achieved success but to the detriment of Black men who want to be someone who is needed as a provider and look to women as a homemaker, “... Black ladies have jobs that are so all-consuming that they have no *time* for men or have forgotten how to treat them” (Collins, 1990)

Black Women Will Save Us, But We Won’t Save Them

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, used the symbolism of the mule to illustrate that Black women were constantly bearing the burden of the world without stopping to think of themselves, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (Wall, 2000). Placing the symbolism of the mule in the 2020 concept there was a constant use of the phrase “Black women are going to save us”. Jones argues that white people who have embraced the phrase “Black women are going to save us” is a modern day mammy 2.0 because we are all knowing and willing to forgo our own suffering for the sake of others (Jones 2019). This phrase was used constantly throughout the political cycle of the presidential election when the demographics of voting came out to show that Black women turned out in mass numbers for democratic issues, especially in terms of the Black American politician, Stacy Abrams when she mobilized Georgia voters and flipped the historically republican state blue. This places a burden on Black women when people constantly look toward us to be saved but when we need protection or saving no one is around.

TikTok creator @jazturner16 has the perfect example of the soft life movement. In the TikTok, she is in what is assumed to be her apartment drinking coffee in a green robe and the dubbed voiceover from another creator on TikTok named @look_its_britt where the full quote says, “I don’t know who needs to hear this but that whole strong Black woman narrative, it doesn’t apply to me. I live a soft life. I am a dainty princess. I will fall out at the drop of a minor inconvenience.” (Turner, 2022). This phrase tries to dispel the that Black women aren’t feminine by saying that they are dainty which brings a new meaning to the soft life movement. Soft life has a double meaning such as leading a life of leisure without having worries and also soft life in the sense that Black women are perceived as soft and feminine. The caption that @jazturner16 has in her TikTok says, “Soft life: a life of ease, peace, comfort, and intentional happiness #softlife #healthyliving #motivation #atlanta #blackgirlluxury”. These hashtags are different ways that Black women are interpreting what it means to have a soft life. This creation of self that Black women are doing online can be a way to minimize the harm done to them, “... Black women employ these same platforms in ways that subvert negative stereotypes through processes that can be their health-affirming practice. Simply put, both the process of creation and material created are co-constructive harm reduction strategies” (Bailey, 2021). This enables people to see Black women as a person that feels pain and humanizes them, especially during 2020 when we were inundated with information on Black women who die disproportionately at the hands of healthcare professionals.

The user @annamaye took to TikTok to share a testimonial about her embracing the soft life and how it’s affected her dating life and her financial circumstances,

“The moment I started dating men who actually wanted to be men and left behind a man who wanted to be the bad bitch in the relationship, my life changed drastically. Like

instantly. I met a guy last year who put me on four planes during the summertime. I've never experienced that. He's helped me change the numbers in my bank account. And he's made it to where I work because I want to not because I have to. Moral of the story, get you a man who wants to be an asset in your life, not a liability" (Maye, 2022).

This video was stitched together with a video by another creator that talked about wanting to live a soft life because they have been living in their masculine energy. These talking points of the soft life movement also is rooted within the mansphere definition of dating up. TikTok also hashtags such as #blackgirlluxury, #hypergamy, #devinefeminineenergy, and #traditionalvalues. The hashtags that appear in most of the soft life TikTok's are #blackgirlluxury giving an indicator of class being important to achieving the soft life aesthetic within the gender and race intersections.

The Black women who participate in the soft life movement try to dispel the myths of the strong Black woman stereotype but end up trying to constrict expressions of Black womanhood. Soft life fuels Black woman's subordination because it relies on an externally defined imagery of the strong Black woman. While trying to subvert this image they are using it as a tool to blame other Black women who do not embrace this aesthetic and ultimately chastise them for not performing their gender correctly. Overall, this is not a movement that all Black women have access to especially if they are not middle class/ upper middle class. The creators on TikTok are feeding lies to their viewers so they have something to aspire to.

Conclusion

The digital identities that we see being created within these movements are ones that we see as a means to escape their oppressive lives. Their digital selves are living the dream that their IRL selves wish they could and it gives them hope for the future. These radical traditional movements embed hope within their participants that people would see them as more when their real selves seemingly hold no value than their digital selves. The Covid-19 pandemic made everyone have an existential crisis and question who we are and the life that we are living.

Building on the findings of this research this can be expanded further into how these movements affect queer and transgender and others who don't fit into the gender binary. While there were some topics pointed to folks that live outside of the binary this ultimately is one of the limitations of focusing on straight cisgender movements and how this can prove to be harmful.

This research can also include more political radicalizations that seem to be growing along with the Black manosphere. In Brandi Collin Dexter's book, *Black Skinhead: Reflections on Blackness and Our Political Future*, rethinking how Kanye West who was someone who seemed ahead of his time in all aspects becomes a conservative who hangs out with Candace Owens while wearing a Maga Hat. Black people who are flocking to the republican and conservative spaces because of the disillusionment of the story of Blackness that often doesn't get explored when looking how people vote. It would be interesting to see if there was any correlation between social media users being indoctrinated in radical online movements and how it looks like in the voting booth.

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