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A Look In Our Lives: Mary J. Blige's My Life, The 4991 Series, and Black Women's Narratives as Working Cultural Memories

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The initial inspiration for my critical dialogue project *The 4991 Series* stemmed from fleeting moments of nostalgic recognition that some of my favorite albums and films were turning twenty years old. The string of pivotal moments from 1994's year in black music paralleled my own coming of age story growing up black in the 1990s. While select anniversaries have been discussed at length – i.e. Nas' *Illmatic* album – little attention focuses on staple moments from 1994 produced by or featuring black women. TLC's *CrazySexyCool*, Mary J. Blige's *My Life*, Aaliyah's *Age Ain't Nothing But a Number*, Da Brat's *Funkdafied*, and Brandy's *Brandy* are major milestones in popular music that update the trajectory of black women's narratives in American culture. Thus, the premise of *The 4991 Series* is to highlight these albums as entry points for discussing late 20th and 21st century race, gender, and identity politics.

A Breakdown of The 4991 Series Production Process

Aesthetic Influences

The 4991 Series exists as a crux of public space, race, and popular scholarship. Perhaps most unique about this project is the intentionally unorthodox approach to scholarship and archive – the loose, conversational style of the interview/dialogue format is meant to reflect the unorthodox if not messy experiences of being black and female in a deemed postracial era – post everything? – society. The structure and format of *The 4991 Series* borrows from Mark Anthony Neal's *Left of Black web series* (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBEF73A21DAA138AF>) and Esther Armah's radio show *The Spin* (<https://soundcloud.com/thespinn1/the-spin-11-27-14fva/recommended>). There are currently five episodes, ranging from forty-five minutes to an hour, edited into three segments lasting fifteen to twenty minutes. Each episode features a panel of three to five women of color offering their reflections and criticism of the selected album/text. Neal's interdisciplinary focus on African American culture and use of social media is useful in seeking out ways to think about black women's narratives in popular music and culture from multiple fields of study. The questions are interdisciplinary in context including feminist theory, literary criticism, and history. Armah's intentional use of an all-women panel useful for dictating new media as a space for women of color to contribute their perspectives on current events and raise awareness of social (in)justice otherwise

pushed to the margins of mainstream society. Additionally, I look for this project to extend conversations about late 19th and early 20th century black women performers offered by Angela Davis, Daphne Brooks, Jayna Brown, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Emily Lordi by putting them in conversation with more recent women in hip hop and R&B.

Album/Subject Selection

The series focuses on an album performed by black women in the genres of hip hop or R&B. Each album was socially relevant and industrially successful in 1994, i.e. Da Brat's *Funkdafied* album as the first rap album to go platinum by a woman emcee.

Panel Selection and Discussion Questions Sample

Each panelist represents a different field of academic study or perspective. They are selected for their fresh insight, innovative scholarship, and willingness to help promote the series. For example, in Episode 3 (the episode submitted for this paper), panelists with backgrounds in history, literature, and Women's, Sexuality, and Gender Studies were selected to discuss Mary J. Blige's *My Life* album. This episode features panelists Drs. Tanisha Ford, Treva B. Lindsey, and Emily Lordi. Upon their agreement to participate in the conversation, a list of questions was sent to each panelist to prepare for our conversation. A sampling of the questions addressed in this episode can be found below:

- 1.) *How did you become a fan of Mary J. Blige and the My Life album?*
- 2.) *How does Mary J. Blige parallel or extend the Blues Woman aesthetic to carve out a space for herself in hip hop and R&B?*
- 3.) *How does Mary J. Blige signify upon multiple narratives and/or interpretations of violence to write herself into a larger and frequently masculine space of hip hop/black popular music?*

Panelists then convene on a Google Hangout chat session for our discussion.

Editing Process

After the conversation is completed, the raw footage is downloaded and edited with video software (iMovie). Editing to the footage is minimal, with the exception of reviewing and removing white noise and other interruptions. Minimal editing is significant in preserving the organic flow and construction of the conversation and critical framework being developed. The footage is then cut into segments for easier

viewing and audience retention. Additional slides of information – a title slide and credit reel – are added to each segment. The segments are then exported and uploaded on YouTube.

Publication and Advertising

The polished segments are uploaded weekly to YouTube and shared via Twitter and Facebook. I also use the hashtag #4991Series to track its movement across social media with the hopes of broadening the scope of conversation and audience.

Breaking Barriers: Using Social Media to Hack 21st Century Black Feminist Discourse

The increasingly blurry ebb-and-flow of race, class, and identity earmarks the 21st century as a “messy” moment of social-cultural interaction. Online and new media amplify the anxieties surrounding discussions of race and identity issues from offline and seep into digital domains. Concrete markers of race and identity from the immediate past are repurposed to fit an increasing demand for racial ambiguity in popular and shared spaces. In its most idealistic state the Interweb fulfills the expectation of postracialism/racial ambiguity in its ability for users to perform, amplify, or redact aspects of their identity otherwise dismissed offline.

Additionally, digital spaces collapse binaries deemed concrete in the academy and beyond: private/public, scholarly/popular, and objective/subjective. *The 4991 Series* takes advantage of occupying the interstitial spaces between these types of binaries, existing in the cracks in order to break through – or hack – a space underutilized as a gateway to projecting and capturing contemporary black women’s experiences. The conversations that take place are direct, humorous, bold, and unfiltered, invoking the ‘kitchen table’ conversations that serve as spaces of healing and debate in the African American community. For example, in Episode 2 about TLC’s *CrazySexyCool* panelists discuss *CrazySexyCool* as a pleasure narrative for young black women and how their song “Waterfalls” can be used as an anthem for public health awareness regarding the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Extending Joan Morgan’s theorization of (hip hop) feminism as a space willing to “fuck with the grays,” *The 4991 Series* is a project that exists in the gray spaces of black women’s experiences in and outside of the academy and the cultural criticism that frequently overlooks their significance.

Further, *The 4991 Series* simultaneously returns to and updates the understanding that black women’s lives and perspectives are not rooted in the academy but are nonetheless filled with potential to critically engage questions of race, space, and

gender. This kitchen table rhetoric – the notion that black women invoke criticism in intimate and healing spaces – influences my use of technology like Google Hangout to capture how black women produce kitchen table criticism in a digital era. The privacy of the initial Google Hangout recording – the sessions are invitation only – signifies the initial premise of the conversations as private but with far-reaching and public effects. The tug and pull of reclamation and recognition in digital spaces makes the Interweb, particularly social media, ripe for analysis as a working space for critical and cultural memory for black women.

Aside from preserving and constructing a personal archive about each work – each panelist starts the conversation by talking about their first encounter with the music and how it shaped their life at the moment – additional objectives for the project include documenting shifts in how critical dialogues about black women are taking place and mapping out how these conversations can be used for social-cultural change in a digital era. For example, the tragic deaths of Aiyana Jones, Rekia Boyd, and Renisha McBride gained recognition through Twitter hashtag campaigns and tweets demanding justice for their senseless deaths. The reclamation of their identities via Twitter validated their lives in ways rendered invisible in non-digital spaces. Social media's potential as a living archive of black women's experiences doubly serves as a space of public pedagogy and critical engagement. Thus, *The 4991 Series* utilizes social media to carve out space to recognize the (popular) cultural memories signified by the above-mentioned albums while using them to break new ground in conversations about black women, sexuality, and agency in the 21st century.

Episode Part 1 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0bZ7ZWSVDVQ>)

Episode Part 2 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6U3V3iFUB8g>)

Episode Part 3 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsOZuUdElX0>)

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Dr. Regina N. Bradley researches contemporary African American culture. She writes about post-Civil Rights African American literature, the contemporary Black American South, pop culture, race and sound, and Hip Hop. Dr. Bradley is also the founder and host of Outkasted Conversations, a critically acclaimed dialogue series that explores the impact of hip hop duo Outkast on popular culture. She has published extensively on popular culture and race, including articles in Southern Literary Journal, Journal of Ethnic American Literature, Palimpsest, and Current Musicology. Known as Red Clay Scholar, a nod to her Georgia upbringing, Dr. Bradley's work is featured at www.redclayscholar.com. She can also be reached via Twitter: @redclayscholar.

ONE THOUGHT ON "A LOOK IN OUR LIVES: MARY J. BLIGE'S MY LIFE, THE 4991 SERIES, AND BLACK WOMEN'S NARRATIVES AS WORKING CULTURAL MEMORIES"

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