A Sister Dope Enough to Run a Magazine: Khadijah James as the Black Womanist Journalist in Popular Culture

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"If there was ever a blueprint for being a boss ass [B]lack woman with realistic career goals, relationships and experiences, it was Khadijah James." - Bee Pollard, Blavity.com (2017)

Introduction

To understand Khadijah James, you must recognize Queen Latifah.

And to recognize Queen Latifah, you must contend with her existence as a plus-sized Black woman in hip-hop -- an embodiment of resistance to intersectional forces of oppression along lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, and size.

Through an intersectional and intertextual character study, this article situates Khadijah James – as portrayed on the FOX sitcom "Living Single" by multi-hyphenate entertainer Queen Latifah – as a complex image of the Black journalist in popular culture. Although she might be discounted as far-removed from the historical examples of race women working in journalism – such as Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Edna Payne, Charlayne Hunter-Gault and the like – Latifah's portrayal of James is a reflection of the Black image in the *Black* mind. Created for a Black audience by Black creators, James is a character who contested notions "Black-collar" work (Brackett, 2021), feminism and femininity, and unarticulated queer identity. Latifah's cultural production – music and music videos, theater, interviews, and other forms – alongside the syndicated television episodes and the fan communities that have sprung up around them in digital spaces, presents a rich archive of texts that are essential for understanding the significance of Khadijah James' image as an entrepreneurial Black journalist in the late 1990s. This paper

contributes to literature on the image of the journalist in popular culture through a close reading of the television show "Living Single," with a focus on Khadijah James, editor and publisher of Flavor Magazine. The analysis here considers James' offscreen influence vis-a-vis Queen Latifah/Dana Owens, the actress who brought her character to life, as well as the economic, social, and political influences on her character.

The history of Black women at work on television informs a different approach to understanding the image of the journalist in Black popular culture – one defined by the nature of subjectivities along axes of power, including (simultaneously) race, gender, class, sexuality and other socially constructed forms of identity. In the sections that follow, we contextualize Khadijah's existence by reviewing the history of television portrayals of Black working women and the erasure of Black journalists in both scholarship and entertainment.

Dealing with deficits: Research on Black journalists

As subjects, Black journalists have often been ignored, rendered invisible, or positioned as hyperinvisible in journalism studies scholarship. White's (1950) foundational study of "Mr. Gates," focused on the role of the journalist in the 1950s, while the nation's oldest journalism program didn't graduate its first Black student until 1957 (Texas Newspaper Hall of Fame, n.d.). Intervention to meaningfully desegregate news media did not begin until the late 1960s and early 1970s, following the 1968 publication of the Kerner Commission Report, which criticized the industry's failure to hire and retain Black journalists as a shortcoming that skewed reality of Black-white economic and social inequality.

The next 60 years brought incremental progress through formal affirmative action measures and pressure from industry groups such as the National Association for Black

Journalists (NABJ). From 1978 to the late 1990s, the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Year 2000 challenge encouraged U.S. newsrooms to achieve racial and gender parity with their surrounding communities. The goal was eventually abandoned in the late 1990s as it became apparent the industry would not meet it.

Affinity groups, such as NABJ drew attention to the industry's endemic failure to meaningfully integrate over the years. These issues remain a plague on the industry, as highlighted by the so-called "racial reckoning" of 2020, when Black journalists' experiences with marginalization on the job again came into focus (Bramlett-Solomon et al., 2025).

In the intervening years, most of the research on Black journalists has focused on their job satisfaction and editorial influence – more accurately, the lack thereof. Bramlett-Solomon's (1992) foundational research on Black journalists focused on job satisfaction, providing insight on the factors that influenced Black news workers to enter and stay in the field. Contemporarily, researchers continue to observe similar themes in the work lives of Black journalists: that job satisfaction and quality of life improved with higher salaries and more editorial influence (Bramlett-Solomon, Moody-Ramirez and Platenburg, 2025). The bulk of scholarship on this population is concentrated on their experiences in predominantly white newsrooms, rendering the Black press as separate and unequal site for inquiry, despite being the predominant space for Black media entrepreneurship.

The Black Journalist in popular culture

Art imitates life in studies of Black journalists in popular culture. Although previous research (e.g., Erlich and Saltzman, 2015) has considered the journalist's portrayal on television (Stone and Lee, 1990), including professional identity among shifting technologies (Painter and

Ferrucci, 2024), job function, and even gender (Cvetkovic and Oostman, 2018), few (e.g., Butler and Clemons, 2021) have interrogated the embodiment of Black journalists on television – and even fewer still, the existence of Black women journalists in entertainment media. An incomplete list of Black journalists in 20th and 21st century pop culture includes Denzel Washington ("Grey Grantham," The Pelican Brief), Sanaa Lathan (Sidney "Sid" Shaw, Brown Sugar), Gabrielle Union ("Mary Jane Paul," Being Mary Jane), T.C. Carson ("Dexter Jackson," Livin' Large), and Tracee Ellis Ross ("Diane," Cold Copy). This article focuses on Khadijah James, a central character in the late 1990s to early 2000s FOX sitcom, "Living Single."

Black characters at work and home

Black professionals' cultural backgrounds are essential to their coding and reception on the small screen. "Black-collar professionalism … the conduct, aims, or qualities in American traditionally identified professional, and often white-collar, work environments, alongside their work ethics often aligned with traditional blue-collar ideologies" (Bracket, 2021, pp. 14) is a throughline connecting Black characters at work for more than 50 years. From Diahnn Carroll's "Julia" on the 70s show of the same name to Chandra Wilson's "Miranda Bailey," a creation of Black showrunner Shonda Rhimes, Black characters reliably exhibit a sense of racial consciousness that colors their relationships onscreen and their reception by viewers. Themes of having to be "twice as good" to make it in their chosen field are repeated again and again by characters such as Scandal's attorney and fixer, Olivia Pope, and Lone Star 9-1-1's Tommy Vega. and Rejection, fueled by white normativity in the writer's room, echoes on-screen for characters who confront racism at work. Brackett (2021) notes that those who work as entrepreneurs pursue their careers as calling, and grapple with the same economic, social, and

occupational hardships experienced by Black workers in the audience: a lack of access to capital, alienation within the community, and unwieldy schedules (Brackett, 2021).

Survey research indicates that viewers perceive African Americans' work roles on television as true-to-life (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008, p. 251). Television depictions of characters at work are thought to be particularly influential for youth from backgrounds impacted by structural racism (Hoffner et al, 2006), as their watch time helps construct a space for observation that can contribute to Bandura's concept of self-actualization via observation (2001). However, Wellington's (2016) early research on African American teenage girls indicated they were more readily influenced by familial and community-centric expectations of pursuing higher education and a professional career than by internalizing narratives about Black occupational opportunities via scripted television. The middle-school girls in Wellington's study voiced an "appreciation for characters" that echoes the sentiments Black adult women shared about their appreciation for seeing reflections of themselves in the book "Waiting to Exhale" (Zook, 1999).

More broadly, the presence and representation of Black characters on television remains an area of concern for media scholars. In a sweeping analysis of 50 years of television programming, Tyree and Powell (2022) identified five themes that characterized the appearance of Black women on scripted and reality programming: the absence of Black family life vis a vis the reductive "strong Black woman" stereotype; a lack of loving relationships for Black women; an emphasis on Black excellence, i.e., poised and professional characters fixed in white-collar jobs; the enduring stereotypes linked to slavery and subjugation, and a lack of storylines depicting Black women as LGBTQIA characters. Khadijah James' narrative arc on Living Single reflects each of these, to a degree, but also illustrates the need to apply intersectional lenses to such an analysis. To wit, the "Black family life" on Living Single operates outside of the

dominant culture assumption that narrowcasts a "family" as a heterosexual couple and their children.

Black women at (fictional) work. Black women have always been working women in television sitcoms. In 1948, actress Amanda Randolph starred as a magical Negro maid in "The Laytons" (Scott, 2014). Ethel Waters, Hattie McDaniel, and Louise Beavers would share a similar role – each playing "Beulah" in the televised edition of the eponymous radio drama during the 1950s (Scott, 2014). Nichelle Nicholls' character Nyoto Uhura, a translator on the Starship Enterprise, was perhaps the first Black woman to hold a so-called white-collar job on television, debuting in the initial (unreleased) pilot episode of "Star Trek" (Scodari, 2012; Blaylock, 2024). "Julia," played by Diahann Carroll, was the second, with Carroll becoming the first Black woman to be nominated for an Emmy in the show about a Vietnam War widow and mother working as a nurse during the show's run from 1968 to 1971 (Cheers, 2020).

In the 1970s and early 80s, Black women on television usually held working-class jobs, such as Florida Evans (Good Times), or Louise "Weezy" Jefferson's backstory as a maid before she and husband George moved on up to the Eastside. Aunt Esther (Sanford and Son) worked in service for the Lord as a deaconess. Phylicia Rashad's portrayal of Clair Huxtable emerged as the archetype for a growing class of college-educated Black women on television on "The Cosby Show" (1984-1992) as more Black women began to join the white-collar working world on TV. As other networks, notably FOX, attempted to emulate the show's success by courting Black audiences, these characters began to enjoy a range of professional roles, including as journalists.

Enter Khadijah James.

Howard University graduate, entrepreneur, and round-the-way girl Khadijah James was introduced to American audiences when “Living Single” debuted on FOX television on Aug. 22, 1993. The show focused on four Black, college-educated women courting love and success in New York City. It was designed to capitalize on the success of author Terry McMillan’s novel “Waiting to Exhale,” an examination of Black female interiority and relationships among professional women (Zook 2003).

Method

An analysis of the Black journalist vis-a-vis Queen Latifah's portrayal of Khadijah James on Living Single -- particularly one pursued by a Black feminist researcher- demands an intersectional, interdisciplinary, and intertextual approach that defies the limitations of traditional textual or content analysis. To this end, Venus Evans-Winter's approach of "daughtering" provides context for the retrospective analysis of James as an exemplar of the Black journalist in popular culture: "As daughters, we were taught how to observe the unseen, contemplate the ignored, interpret the forgotten, and analyze the taken for granted, and speak the forbidden. In our knowledge pursuits, we make it a point to be transdisciplinary" (2019, p. 139).

Applied in this study, “daughtering” is performing a critically informed and close reading of media texts that positions the depiction of Khadijah James as a multidimensional subject *as* we consider Queen Latifah and the labels used to describe her: a pioneering hip-hop artist, jazz singer, plus-sized model, producer, television, theater, and film star – one who is often ascribed a queer identity. Latifah and her Living Single character, Khadijah, are constructed as dynamic subjects used to interpret an emergent archetype of the Black journalist in popular culture. Through daughtering as a method, character studies are unrestricted by the temporal limitations

of re-watching a sitcom long out of production. Instead, scholars can consider both Latifah's pre-screen existence and her various afterlives as Khadijah in syndication, streaming, and digital fandom dialogues. Daughtering also informs the approach to reviewing and organizing the literature related to this project, particularly the emphasis to #CiteASista (#CiteASister) and draw on works from Black scholars in media studies, journalism, sociology, education, and other fields whose work insists on interpretation from and for Black perspectives.

Following Beltrán's (2020) description of image analysis with respect to non-White television characters, I examine Khadijah's portrayal, settings, and interactions, paying close attention to the most salient attributes of her role as a Black journalist, and then focus on what these attributes signify in context. In this case, context is drawn from critical reactions to Khadijah's character and to Latifah's existence as a boundary-breaking hip-hop artist in the 1990s and early 2000s. We also include narrative analysis to identify how Khadijah's character contributes to the overarching narrative of "Living Single," and more broadly, its attempt to signal the realities of professional Black women's work and personal lives.

The primary questions guiding this study is *"How is Khadijah James constructed for audiences as a Black journalist?"*

Taking the episode as a unit of analysis, we used a pre-constructed episode guide featuring detailed plot descriptions of all five seasons of "Living Single" to identify episodes that explicitly referenced Khadijah's role as a journalist, focusing on those in which her role, or the welfare of her publication, Flavor Magazine, were identified as a central and significant driver of the plot. Two researchers then watched and coded half of the episodes that fit our inclusion criteria, following Beltrán's approach to critical television studies centering ethnic minorities to guide an image analysis of Khadijah's character. We discussed our initial findings, and formed a series of codes to analyze the relationships between James and Flavor magazine, as well as her

relationships to other characters from her position as a magazine editor. In a third round of coding, the primary researcher used the initial memos to develop categories and generate themes from the data, searching for more episodes that mentioned Flavor magazine to construct a larger purposive sample, and coded the data by iterating between the episodes themselves, the initial research memos, relevant literature, and time-in-point derivative works – such as journalistic coverage of the show published at the time of its airing and more contemporary works reminiscent of its significance in Black popular culture, to finalize the key themes and write the discussion.

In the sections that follow, we present an analysis that works from the outside (Khadijah's aesthetics) to her shared interiority with Queen Latifah (questioning a queer identity). First, we explore how the tensions of oppression – even in the face of uplift – fall along lines of race, gender, and capital to shape Khadijah's reality. Second, we consider an intertextual reading of Queen Latifah as Khadijah James that also draws attention to the latter's unarticulated sexuality as part of this particular image of the Black journalist in popular culture. We close with a call for scholars to engage with the construction of Black professional women and femmes' friendships with one another, and how those relationships influence their working lives.

Constructing Khadijah

Khadijah's role as a journalist, and specifically, an entrepreneurial editor and publisher of her own magazine both follows and conflicts with Tyree and Powell's (2022) observations about Black women on television as accomplished, seemingly unimpeachable white-collar workers. The emphasis on triumphant self-determination as a characteristic of Black labor is essential to her storyline. Yet the slavery and subjugation element is both subtle and controlling: throughout the series, Khadijah consistently struggles to raise money for Flavor Magazine, which reflects

the economic realities of Black entrepreneurs who face a gauntlet in attempting to attract and retain capital (National Coordinating Committee, YTPTCOI, 1974). *Flavor* is assumed to be a Black-focused lifestyle publication, covering culture and issues of concern to Black communities. To situate it within a real-world context, it might be considered in the same family as VIBE Magazine, which was founded as a joint venture between legendary producer Quincy Jones and *TIME* in 1993 as an urban-oriented rejoinder to *Rolling Stone* (Light, 1998).

Queen Latifah's proven status as one of the foremost women in hip-hop was instrumental to the show's storylines and success during its five-year run in the mid-to-late 90s. Latifah's "fictional, presentational, and documentary personas" presence on the show is read as a bold signifier of womanism (Zook 2003, pp. 65-66), building on Alice Walker's articulation of a Black female politic that acknowledges the "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior" of Black women resisting oppression. Walker (1983, pp. xi) defines two more dimensions of womanism that are essential to reading Latifah-as-Khadijah:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to [the] survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female…

Latifah's portrayal of James must be interpreted intertextually, as the entertainer was instrumental in the show's development – from its history-making deal with Yvette Lee Bowser as the first Black woman to write a television show for primetime TV (Zook, 2003), to its whitewashed repurposing as NBC's "Friends" (Clark, 2021). Her success as one of the foremost women in hip hop at the time of the show's debut has a pronounced imprint on Khadijah's character. For instance, Khadijah is a founder and publisher of Flavor Magazine, a publication

that takes its name from Latifah's Flavor Unit entertainment company, which initially developed hip-hop and R&B acts before transitioning into television and movie production. Latifah's indelible influence is seen in every aspect of Khadijah's life, right down to the character's aesthetics.

Soul sister style

On screen and in real life, Black style is a rich site for exploring identity from the subject themselves and the object of analysis (Hall, 1993). Whether as television characters or actors in daily life, Black women's fashion choices have always been a part of our visual identities. In reading Khadijah as a Black journalist, we first consider her self-presentation in the territories of the self (Goffman, 1949), including her body and her style of dress.

Khadijah's visual aesthetic is drawn directly from Queen Latifah's, and is accentuated by her size and the way she uses her stature to demand respect in her interactions at work. Given the latter's longevity and prominence in the entertainment industry, we must consider the influence of Latifah's performance of "corpulent Afrocentric queendom" as an essential contribution to Khadijah's image (Cochran, 2021). Khadijah's clothes evoked a certain sense of "soul-style" - the intentional incorporation of Afrocentric elements including color and materials to signal pride in a uniquely Black experience - the emergence of hip-hop as a global cultural phenomenon (Ford, 2015; Rose, 1990).

Khadijah's appearance is an articulation of Wicks' (2022) concept of the Black tomboy -- a woman or femme with an aesthetic that queers assumptions of gender binaries and racialized notions of how Black women should present themselves to be seen as respectable while gaining access to otherwise off-limits spaces where power is negotiated. Throughout the show,

Khadijah's friends/roommates Synclaire, Régine, and Maxine (Max) are often dressed in outfits that signal femininity and assimilation into corporate culture – pastel colors, high heels, long braids or weaves, and the sharp, asymmetric haircuts that help characterize Black women's aesthetic excess (Hernandez, 2020). Often dressed in boldly colored powersuits with baggy pants, Khadijah prefers a style more in line with hip-hop fashion. Whether at work or at home, she wears oversized, baggy clothing in bright colors like that common to rappers of her time. Gone are Latifah's trademark headwraps and hats used to signal her persona as an African queen. Instead, her natural hair is either pulled back into a no-nonsense bun or perfectly coiffed in straightened styles reminiscent of Clair Huxtable, easily assimilable for white workplaces, which hints at the influence of how whiteness influences pop-culture depictions of Black professionalism (Dawson, Karl, and Peluchutte 2019).

Struggle love: The Black media entrepreneur's story

Although Black television of the 1990s attempted to follow suit with The Cosby Show and reflect a more upwardly mobile picture of Black class mobility in everything from aesthetics to occupations, the "scratching-and-surviving" (Harris, 2021) narrative characterized Khadijah's leadership of Flavor Magazine throughout the show, and is the controlling narrative about the Black journalist in this example of popular culture. From the pilot episode, Khadijah struggles with a range of financial issues – many of them common to media entrepreneurship, like securing steady capital and supervising a diverse team; others, such as balancing her allegiance to family members and the Black community with the magazine's interests. Like Black publishers since time immemorial (Green, 1977), Khadijah spent much of her time managing

Flavor pursuing advertising and subscriber dollars, and fighting off competition in the market that might lure away one or both sources of income.

Season 1, Episode 4: "In the Black is Beautiful," plays on Flavor's financial precarity. Over the course of the episode, Khadijah runs from some creditors and chases others before begrudgingly accepting a $2,000 loan from Maxine, her college roommate who is now a successful attorney. The episode opens with Khadijah in conversation with a lecherous ad salesman touting an ad campaign that features scantily clad women hanging onto a malt liquor bottle, a send-up to the stereotypical ad campaigns that characterized Black print media advertising (Herd, 1993). He makes a pass at Khadijah, who slips into character as Queen Latifah, using her size and lyrical bravado to take men to task (physically) for overstepping sexual boundaries. As Khadijah returns to her desk, Synclaire, her cousin-turned-receptionist, reminds her that the printer, to whom she owes money, is on hold, threatening to withhold the magazine's next run. Khadijah picks up to reassure him: *"We got the money. We got the money. We got the money."* [hangs up the phone, wails] *"We don't got the money!"*

Flavor's financial woes were reflected in every part of its operations throughout the series. Out-of-date office equipment often went without formal repair, or was sold to generate cash flow. Bills went unpaid, prompting creditors to call and harangue Khadijah for their money - part of an uneven storyline that framed the magazine owner as hapless and perpetually broke. In Season 2, Episode 5, "Bristle While You Work," Khadijah jokes about moving to nonprofit status: *"I looked it over the books and I got it figured out. We can get rid of our debts by declaring Flavor a nonprofit organization. We're gonna have to dress up like nuns. But it could work!"* Régine does her a favor and introduces a local merchant looking to advertise. Khadijah lowballs Flavor's rates because the magazine "really needs the money," and attempts to position

the magazine as an ad agency in an appeal that creates conflict with Régine. The two argue over the ad pitch and Khadijah asserts her position as Flavor's publisher:

> **Khadijah:** *"Regine, I've been doing this a lot longer than you. I know what sells!"*
> **Regine:** *"Yeah, you know what sells. Your magazine is so broke, it's about to become a pamphlet!"*

The very next episode, "School Daze," opens with more financial woes at Flavor:

Khadijah: *Damn, another 30-day notice!*
Synclaire: *Just look on the bright side. Means you have another 29 days of free electricity.*
Speaker: *I thought you always paid your bills on time.*
Khadijah: *I do when I have the money. But things have been so tight lately I'm thinkin' about auctionin' off a kidney.*

Flavor's budget issues are a central part of the storyline in the episode. When Synclaire, Khadijah's cousin and receptionist, and Roger, the music editor, complained about wage conditions and a lack of healthcare coverage in Season 2, Episode 16, their grievances mirrored those of Black workers at the time (Hohan and Pohl, 2003). Encouraged by guest star Bobby Bonilla, fresh off a player's strike for better wages in Major League Baseball, Flavor's staff walks off the job, demanding a 2 percent raise and healthcare coverage. Throughout the episode (and the season as a whole), vignettes with other characters, including Khadijah's stockbroker neighbor, Kyle, indicate that she is either a poor money manager, financially illiterate, or both. The financial issues remain a constant well into Season 4, when Khadijah considers selling 25 percent of the magazine to a firm in order to raise capital. It seems that the healthcare plan offered in S2 never materialized; as it's still on the employees' list of demands in S4:E4, "Not So Silent Partners."

Khadijah's reality as a Black entrepreneur is juxtaposed with the myth of the capitalist American Dream –striking it rich with minimal work– in S4:E4 when she finally accepts a partnership with Maverick Publishing, a Black-owned company that has over the previous three seasons sought to acquire and compete with Flavor Magazine. After '"selling [her] soul" to the company via 25 percent stake of the magazine's ownership, she battles with Jeremy Mills, the company's representative as he speaks over her, overpromises "full medical benefits" to staff, and overspends on a celebratory dinner at a fancy French restaurant, leaving her to deal with consequences when he's unable to deliver on the insurance coverage. Their sparring highlights issues of class privilege and hints at issues of gender-based discrimination in the workplace.

As Jeremy spends the night in Flavor's offices as Khadijah "puts the magazine to bed," he admits he has limited experience with publishing. Both admit they never thought they'd be working with someone from such a different class position – he, from a family with oil money, she an "around the way girl," language he picked up from reading the rap section of the magazine (a call back to Latifah's peer, rapper-turned-actor LL Cool J).

Khadijah: "Look, Jeremy, if I give you static it's because Flavor is more than a magazine. I created it. It's my baby. A baby I have watched grow for four years."

Jeremy: "And my company publishes cash cows like… like Microchip Digest and Liquid Soap quarterly. Sure, it pays for the capped teeth on my polo ponies, but Flavor... Flavor has a voice that this community needs to hear."

Khadijah: "Hmm. That's a pretty good speech. You know, you're right. Halfway through, I started believing it."

Jeremy: "Look, just remember that I'm the boss and everything will be cool. I do have the right to make suggestions."

Khadijah: "And I have the right to say no."

Jeremy: "Now may I go home?"

Khadijah: "No."

The exchange is in keeping with the oversimplification endemic to sitcoms. Despite being bailed out by a Black capitalist, the awards and recognition she wins for her work with Flavor, and the introduction of real-life Black celebrities that position the magazine as a successful lifestyle publication, Khadijah's financial struggles as a publisher fail to account for any of the factors that are well-documented to characterize the hurdles of Black entrepreneurship, beginning with the individualized focus on her character as a business woman.

Fairlie and Robb's (2007) research argues that anywhere from 5 percent to 11 percent of the gap in business outcomes between Black-owned and white-owned business firms can be tied to a lack of managerial socialization among Black entrepreneurs who have not had the opportunity to work in a family business as have their white counterparts. For example, Khadijah's decision to hire her cousin/roommate Synclaire (who is criticized in one early episode as being ill-prepared for her job at the magazine) and later, her college roommate/friend Maxine – tangling with the latter over the editorial direction of her column – support the Fairlie and Robb's arguments that the lack of access to social capital, i.e., people who possess the knowledge and skills to perform specific roles for the betterment of the firm, are a persistent strain on Black business owners.

Feagin and Imani (1994, p. 584) also identify three dimensions of discrimination that Black entrepreneurs face: First, the impact of ongoing economic disadvantages that accumulate over time, creating a shared sense of disempowerment. For instance, competition from Savor Magazine, a new entrant into the Brooklyn market that Flavor called home, posed such a threat that it pushed Khadijah's anxiety to new heights and presented the show's only episode to deal with mental health and therapy among Black people. Second, the appearance of a lack of long-term stability created by upstream market forces that ultimately upend a firm's ability to

maintain itself (which in a Black publisher's case, might be the fickle ad market that courts Black dollars one day, only to abandon those customers for a different segment on the next). Third, the external forms of prejudice that the Black founder must compete with on a day-to-day basis (i.e., attempting to appeal to influential individuals and assimilate into more powerful cultures) in order to survive. Viewers never see Khadijah take meetings with loan officers, or win community-based grants designed to support small business ventures (Clark & Powell, 2023), or even work with other Black publishers to develop a network of support (Mangun & Perry, 2020). She does not have angel investors or the financial support of family to get her business off the ground (Crain, 2009). By comparison, Khadijah's on-screen editor/publisher counterparts appear to come from wealthy families, and have greater economic stability themselves, as they are shown living alone, and rarely talk about threats to their publications' existence.

Beyond the screen, Khadijah's struggles as a journalistic entrepreneur are seemingly incongruent with Queen Latifah's success as an artist and media mogul. In addition to contributing to the development of "Living Single" in the late 1990s, Latifah has launched and maintained (to relative degrees of success) a series of ventures, including her media company, Flavor Unit Entertainment and her real-estate development company, BlueSugar Corporation (Martin, 2021). As a brand ambassador, Latifah has partnered with companies including Cover Girl, Weight Watchers, and Cigna, among others. The comparison suggests that while hip-hop journalism might struggle to attract capital and sustain itself – both in fiction and real life – Latifah's brand is one that is attractive to marketers.

While the show's writers flirted with opportunities to present a more Afrocentric depiction to business management, such as a community-focused mission and race-conscious editorial direction, their efforts were subsumed by the Strong Black Woman (SBW) narrative. Watson and Hunter (2015, p. 425) describe the SBW narrative as a script or schema of cognitive and behavioral expectations that govern Black women's lived experiences, including self-assured/assertiveness, self-reliance/independence, and caring for others. The tensions between Afrocentric business ethics and the SBW schema are revealed as early as the pilot episode, when Khadijah, struggling to keep Flavor in business, accepts a $2,000 loan from Maxine and makes her 2 percent owner of Flavor Magazine. Khadijah admits both resignation and relief when she suggests the arrangement:

"Everybody trying to lend me money, give me money; I'm not used to that. I always had to hold things together. I always had to be the strong one,"

Maxine gently admonishes Khadijah, reminding her that this is a story she's telling about herself – not one that's being forced onto her. The moment is emblematic of Khadijah's presentation as a Black businesswoman whose personal relationships are significant contributors to her professional persona as a journalist.

The Black Womanist Journalist

As a character, Flavor Magazine editor Khadijah James is a refusal of the distinction between Blackness and womanhood. Her hip-hop aesthetic and propensity "bring wreck" (Pough, 2004) to workplace dynamics – that is, addressing the controlling images that are often assigned to Black women both on screen and off (Hammer, 2009; – are two considerations that allow us to interpret Khadijah's priorities when it comes to her labor and her lovers. The mix of

business and pleasure was a constant theme in Khadijah's oversight of Flavor Magazine. The show's dialogue and scene blocking rendered the magazine's interview subjects and potential business partners as romantic suitors and potential partners; unwanted advances came from salesmen and subordinates alike.

While the realities of Khadijah's role as a media entrepreneur are often overshadowed by the focus on her love life, she does confront professional issues common to the field. Khadijah's crusade to keep the magazine solvent all return to the issues of financial support: an inability to attract desirable advertisers in Seasons 1 and 2; difficulty retaining and supporting staff with standard benefits in Season 2; spats over editorial content wrought by hiring for convenience and cost in Season 3, and the threat of a costly libel suit in Season 4. Season 5, however, focuses more on the personal lives of the characters, including a return to the question of whether Khadijah is willing to choose her career over her love interest, her childhood friend, Scooter. Ultimately, it is this on-again, off-again relationship that highlights the complexities a Black woman journalist faces: work is never just work; love is never just love. Both are spaces for calling into question the societal expectations and tropes that Black women have to contend with in order to be seen as "respectable" in society. As sociologist Carolyn Fuchs Epstein wrote of Black women in the workplace:

> [B]lack women are found in professions and occupations known to be difficult for white women to penetrate. Because these women are [B]lack they are perhaps not perceived as women; they may be regarded as more "serious" professionals than white women; they may not be viewed as sexual objects nor be seen as out to get a husband. The stereotypes attached to the so-called feminine mind, emotions, or physiology may not seem easily transferable to black women, for whom there seem to be fewer stereotypes in the context of the professionally trained (1973, 917).

Unlike her white female counterparts onscreen in journalism (Cvetkovic & Postman, 2018) – Khadijah is rarely interpreted as exploiting her femininity, sexuality, or romantic

relationships to advance in the profession. In fact, the latter is referenced either jokingly or as an inflection point about which she values more: her man or her career. In this regard, the Black woman journalist in popular culture is subjected to controlling narratives that often shape both Black characters on screen and Black professional women in the workplace, highlighting the truly intersectional narrative being played out on the screen.

Reading between the screens. Taking a brief departure from a more limited interpretation of the character, "daughtering" leads us to read Khadijah's desire for companionship via heterosexual relationships on the show intertextually - beyond the confines of both the script and the times. For some viewers, Khadijah was and is juxtaposed with Latifah's "obvious lesbian prowess," (Phillips, 2023) leaving viewers to interpret both the actress and the character via what Joyrich calls a "hermeneutic of suspicion" - questioning the actress' sexuality in spite of the image conveyed in her character's on-again, off-again romance with her childhood friend, Scooter, or the handful of other male suitors who appeared in her storylines.

Although Latifah has been photographed with women rumored to be her partners, professed affinity with the LGBTQIA+ community, including an aunt said to inspire her portrayal of a stud (Black butch lesbian) in the movie "Set it Off," she has pointedly refused to declare her personal sexual identity in the public sphere. Instead, she has kept the conversation about queer sexuality limited to her on-screen characters, including her portrayal of bisexual jazz singer Bessie Coleman in the biopic "Bessie." On Living Single, Khadijah steps in as an ally to friends of Maxine, when one of her friends from college surprises her with the news that she's marrying another woman (S3:E22, "Woman to Woman").

Like Black women at work everywhere, Khadijah was forced to confront others' perceptions of her attractiveness and availability, even when she enjoys a superior role in the workplace (Crenshaw 1991). Thus we limit our reading of her character's on-screen sexuality to its relevance in her professional life (Hector, 2021). Following Walker (1983), we reject the compulsion to ascribe Owens/Latifah a queer identity when she has not done so herself. Instead, we use our perception via daughtering – seeing what is not professed – to describe Owens-as-Latifah-as-Khadijah as a "womanist," a Black woman whose primary concern is the whole and wholeness of her community (Walker, 2004, p. 81.) This distinction is useful in further interpreting Khadijah's portrayal as a Black journalist in popular culture, particularly as it comes to the romantic and professional relationships she navigates at and alongside work.

Seeking Mr. Right. Throughout the course of the show, Khadijah's job creates throuple dynamics in the interactions with the men who vie for her attention (and vice versa). Whether being harassed by the aforementioned ad salesman in Season 1, misinterpreting mutual interest with an aspiring contributor to Flavor in Season 3, or her on-again, off-again relationship with childhood friend Scooter that spans all five seasons of the show, Khadijah's romantic potential is always measured in professional degrees. As a result, her personal-as-professional existence is defined by "love inequality," where her entrepreneurial venture subjects her to multiple, hierarchical systems of oppression in multiple locations of her life (Clarke, 2011, p. 4). Still, none of these relationships are as compelling as the ones Khadijah has with her roommates and friends.

Homegirl Homophily

Ultimately, Khadijah James exemplifies the "Black-collar professional," one whose work is informed by racial uplift and a more working-class than white-collar professional ethos (Brackett, 2021). However, she is surreptitiously portrayed as the Strong Black Woman whose personal life often interferes with or suffers from her commitment to her work as an editor and publisher - even to the extent of triggering mental health issues (Zook, 2003). Most alarmingly, although not surprisingly, even though Khadijah has the support of her friends, she often stands alone in her professional world as a journalist, without the mentors, sponsors, and advocates that Black women in leadership have been taught are essential to our success (Harris, 2010). The notable exception to this individualistic portrayal comes in Season 4, Episode 15, when Susan L. Taylor, the iconic editor of Essence magazine –the first magazine created for Black women– presents Khadijah with an award and references watching her career grow from her days as an Essence intern from Howard University to the present.

While this lack of support rings true in some respects for many Black journalists, particularly Black women journalists, it ignores the existence of organizations like the National Association of Black Journalists and the informal sisterhoods formed by Black women and our allies who assume similar roles, offering networks of support that have proven essential for Black media makers since the founding of the first Black woman-owned newspaper in the late 19th century (Richardson, 2025).

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Khadijah James is found in the show's premise: the relationships among Black professional women. From the show's introductory scene to its conclusion, we see James "living single" alongside her friends who are routinely called upon to assist with her professional ventures and provide support in her personal life. The lines between the two are often intentionally blurred: For Khadijah, publishing Flavor isn't just a job, it is a calling of service to the Black community, which begins with her friends and roommates. Given the limits of this article, I close with a brief discussion that an examination of Khadijah's friendships with other Black professional women is another opportunity for research.

As mentioned earlier, there is little separation between Khadijah's personal and professional life, which extends to her friendships as well. Her former college roommate and ever-present houseguest, Maxine, becomes part owner/investor in her magazine early on. Khadijah hires her cousin, Synclaire, to work as an administrative assistant for the magazine; she consults with their roommate, Régine (a marketing professional), on ways to attract advertisers and run the business. Beyond these collaborations, Khadijah also relies on her neighbor, Kyle, for help with managing the magazine's finances. Kyle's roommate, Overton (who eventually marries Synclaire), is the only person who doesn't make a recurring or lasting contribution to Khadijah's work as the show progresses, as her relationship with him is mostly limited to comic relief.

Returning to Walker's definition of womanism, particularly the practice of caring for other women both sexually and non-sexually, the lack of attention paid to Khadijah's relationships with other women journalists (who were not her subordinates), or with other journalists, period, reflects an underdeveloped part of her character, and a subject that is attractive for potential study. At work, Khadijah struggles with perceptions of competence. At

home (but also sometimes in the office), she has ongoing battles with the tension of being interpreted as feminine and desirable, but not overly sexualized. These two sets of demands cause Khadijah internal conflict with her own commitments and values, and external conflict with her community, friends, and romantic interests. The pressures – and her responses to them – highlight the intersectional nature of Khadijah's existence as a Black womanist journalist.

In hip-hop journalism, writers and editors such as Dr. Joan Morgan, Danyel Smith, Kierna Mayo, Amy Dubois Barnett, Jamilah Lemieux, Sylvia Obell, Tre'vell Anderson and Taylor Crumpton are among those whose careers may, to some extent, be real-life reflections of Khadijah's. How do these Black women and femmes define themselves, their careers/career aspirations, and how does their profession intertwine with their personal lives? In the same way that "Living Single" served as a kaleidoscope view of professional, single Black women's romantic and occupational experiences, the stories of Black women journalists in hip-hop would provide valuable context for understanding Khadijah and the importance of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the character's portrayal. An examination of the professional relationships these journalists have with one another and others in their network is essential to a richer understanding of Khadijah's character. Queen Latifah said as much in the show's theme song:

> *…Whenever this life gets tough (you gotta fight!)*
> *With my homegirls standing to my left (and my right!)*
> *True blue, and tight like glue…*

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