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Did I Do That?: Lived Experience and Media Representation of the Awkward Black Girl

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Did I Do That? : Lived Experience and Media Representation of the Awkward Black Girl

by

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ABSTRACT

For my thesis project I will introduce the Awkward Black Girl as a new race gender script. Though there are minor nuances of the Awkward Black Girl within television, Issa Rae's performance of the Awkward Black Girl in *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and the HBO hit series *Insecure* remains prevalent to contemporary media representations. Though there is limited scholarship within the field of Communication available about the Awkward Black Girl, most of the scholarship consists of analysis and discourse centering Rae's portrayal in her web series and television show. I explore Quinta Brunson's portrayal of the Awkward Black Girl script to the field of Communication. Therefore, contributing to producing diverse media representation of Black women. First, I explore this script with critical autoethnography to display the lived experiences of an African American woman, and the effect the script has had concerning dominant ideologies formed by the media, identity formation, and interpersonal relationships. Following this, I conduct an in-depth textual analysis in the award-winning series *Abbott Elementary*.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In a photoshoot for *GQ* Magazine, Issa Rae, creator of the hit made-for-HBO series *Insecure* (Baron 2018; Rae & Wilmore, 2016 – 2021) poses in various outfits that pay homage to popular Black television characters of the 20th century (Baron, 2018). The final image is her cosplay of the iconic *Family Matters (1989 – 1998)* character Steve Urkel, a character that has become a household name through generations. Issa Rae's cosplay caught my attention not because of her quirky pose, but because of the significance of this iconic character remake. Issa Rae has used the Awkward Black Girl script predominantly in her online web series *Misadventures of the Awkward Black Girl (2011 – 2013)* and the Primetime award-winning series *Insecure (2016 – 2021)*. There have been nuances of the Awkward Black Girl before, however, many of the characters that have manifested from the Awkward Black Girl have been few, far apart in frequency, and are portrayed by actresses of a lighter skin complexion (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). Aside from this, the Awkward Black Girl stems from the very trope Urkel portrays in *Family Matters*, the Black Nerd. The real reason Issa Rae's cosplay stuck with me, the reason her character Issa Dee stuck with me, and why her series *Insecure* stuck with me, is because I have lived the life of an Awkward Black Girl off-screen.

Though there is limited scholarship on the Awkward Black Girl in Communication, most of the scholarship highlights and centers on Issa Rae's portrayal and contributions. For example, in Francesca Sobande's *Awkward Black girls and post-feminist possibilities*, the author analyzes the implications of post-feminist media in Issa Rae's *Insecure* and Micheala Coel's *Chewing Gum* (2019). The Awkward Black Girl differs from past stereotypical television representations of Black women that present hegemonic racist ideologies of Black women. As I monitor current

television representations, I notice the significance of Quinta Brunson's portrayal of the Awkward Black Girl with her web series and the new show, *Abbott Elementary*. Given the series is fairly new, not much has been written about her performance or contribution to the Awkward Black Girl. As I continued to watch the series, I began to notice common attributes associated with the Awkward Black Girl. I notice in *Abbott Elementary* Janine performs the Awkward Black Girl as a *script,* rather than a trope.

This led me to ask: *How is the Awkward Black Girl a new media script of Black womanhood? How is the Awkward Black Girl represented in media? How do I experience the Awkward Black Girl in everyday life?*

I offer the Awkward Black Girl as a new race-gender script rather than a trope within television and explore the lived experiences of the script through retelling stories from my own life. I explore the Awkward Black Girl in the field of Communication, Critical Cultural Studies, and Black Feminist Media Studies with this thesis project. I analyze Quinta Brunson's contribution to the Awkward Black Girl and argue how her contribution is performed as a script with her performances and production in the critically acclaimed series *Abbott Elementary (2021 -)*. While the series *Abbott Elementary* is fairly new (premiering in the winter of 2021), Brunson's performances of the script have been present since 2017. Like Rae, Brunson started performing as an Awkward Black Girl in her self-produced web series, to her primetime television series, *Abbott Elementary*. To offer the Awkward Black Girl as a script I use critical text-based methods and autoethnographic approaches to analyze the set of performances on screen and in everyday lived experiences.

In this chapter, I introduce my thesis topic, provide a literature review for my research contribution areas, state my theoretical framework and methodology, and provide a chapter

overview for the entirety of the thesis. My research contributes to the discipline of Communication by adding to the field of Critical Cultural Studies, Media Studies, and autoethnographic work. Critical cultural studies ask its own set of questions that "cannot be answered within a given discipline and by forming its own, unique questions and answers germane to its study" (Ono, 2009). Many scholars within this field of study challenge media representations to resist oppressive images. For example, in *The Whites of Their Eyes*, Stuart Hall discusses ideological struggles and how the media is a dominant source for ideology creation (1995). However, many scholars have contributed to this field of study to resist oppressive images of Black women. For example, in *Race and Representation*, bell hooks writes twelve essays that resist and interrogate against oppressive nuances within popular culture (1992). Contemporary examples of critical cultural scholarship include analyzing Black women and authenticity in *Flavor of Love (2006 – 2008)*, and exploring popular culture and lived experiences of Black women through a hip hop feminist perspective (Dubrofsky, 2008; Durham, 2014). Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* discusses controlling images: stereotypes that have worked to deconstruct representations of Black women that paint them as mammies, matriarchs, welfare queens, and jezebels. These controlling images appear to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social justice a normal, natural part of everyday life (Collins, 2002). Scholarship of the Awkward Black Girl notes that this performance works to complicate the controlling images that Black women are ascribed to in television representation based upon a set of themes and character traits that contribute to what Moffitt & Henderson identify as a trope (2020). The Awkward Black Girl works to move beyond controlling images and leave room for new interpretations of Black femininity on television (Bradley, 2015; Moffitt & Henderson, 2020).

Like Rae, Brunson started performing as an Awkward Black Girl in her self-produced web series, to her primetime television series, *Abbott Elementary*. To offer the Awkward Black Girl as a script I use critical text-based methods and autoethnographic approaches to analyze the set of performances on screen and in everyday lived experiences.

Review of Literature

In order to understand the importance of the Awkward Black Girl, it's important to understand the departure that the script makes. A trope is a repeated character or personality that consumers can begin to recognize through a common group of traits. Not to be confused with a stereotype – which is an oversimplified image that is often empty – a trope is commonly used within storytelling for stronger familiarity among audiences. This is why we see these tropes commonly among films, especially television series. Scholarship of the awkward Black girl trope notes that this performance works to complicate the controlling images that Black women are ascribed to in television representation based upon a set of themes and character traits that contribute to this trope (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). Stereotypes however, are informed by controlling images. Patricia Hill Collins defines controlling images as "the gender-specific depiction of people of African descent within Western scholarship and popular culture" (2004, pg. 350). She describes controlling images as symbols and stereotypes "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins, 2002, p. 69). The dominant ideology of the slave era triggered the creation of several controlling images of Black women, which worked to maintain Black women's subordination (Collins, 2002). At the time, the traditional White woman would be pure, submissive, and domestic. White women and the emerging middle class would be encouraged to aspire to these values. The controlling images that Black women encountered painted them as the

complete opposite of those values. The dominant group justified white supremacy arguments by representing African American women within these controlling images. These images consist of the mammy, the matriarch, the sapphire, the welfare queen, and the jezebel. The mammy is typically dark-skinned, aggressive, controlling, and a hardworking servant. The matriarch is a "failed" version of the mammy because of her lack of ability to be a submissive servant to her family and also to White characters around her. She rules over her household and is known for taking the lead role in the home. This works to defeminize the Black woman. A welfare queen is typically tied to a working-class mother who makes use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law. She is represented as content to collect her children's welfare checks as opposed to working outside of the home. The Jezebel is a deviant hypersexual woman. This stereotype works to regulate Black women to be sexually aggressive. All of these controlling images work together to provide ideological justifications for oppressions of race, gender, and class (Adams-Bass et al, 2014; Collins, 2002; Dow, 2015).

Black feminist media scholars bring a critique of gender and race power to critical cultural studies in Communication by describing controlling images and other dehumanizing representations in sitcom and popular reality television series (Boylorn, 2008), music video television (Durham, 2012; 2014), drama television and major motion pictures (Griffin, 2015; 2019). Hip hop feminist Aisha Durham explores what she asserts as the redefinition of the Black Lady script, which is ultimately joined together with the Freak script to put a "play on well-rehearsed and well-worn masculine-defined scripts" (2014; pg. 100). To critique the mammy trope in *The Help (2011),* Rachel Griffin (2015) argues that main characters Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson are used as mammies in a film that serves as post-racial pedagogy. These scholars discuss and critique how tropes and scripts that are informed or alternative to controlling

images are active or redefined in parts of mainstream popular culture. Like Griffin, Durham, Boylorn, and other Black feminist media studies scholars emphasize the importance of analyzing race-gender media representations. These scholars highlight how controlling images creates one-dimensional lenses and ways of seeing Black women. Following these scholars, I use this project to add to the field of Black feminist media studies within communication to discuss and analyze the emerging ways in which the media portrays Black women.

Unlike the mammy, welfare queen, jezebel, and the matriarch, the Awkward Black Girl departs from the guise of controlling images and presents a new way of telling the stories of Black women. There have been quirky/awkward characters on television before, including Black awkward characters (Bradley, 2015; Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). Popular nuances of this type of character can be seen in *Family Matters (1989 – 1998), Fresh Prince of Bel–Air (1990 – 1996), Ugly Betty (2006 – 2010)*, and a contemporary television representation is in Netflix's *Never Have I Ever (2020)*. The Awkward Black Girl is not to be compared to other quirky television tropes due to the distinguishing of awkwardness from quirky (Bradley, 2015). The Awkward Black Girl is comprised of the use of awkwardness, followed by a combination of notable traits that distinguish her from others around her. Awkwardness allows for a new way in which Black women can share stories of Black womanhood (Bradley, 2015).

Awkward

A Black Nerd or 'Blerd' functions as a nerd, or geek. (Nerd and Geek are slightly different, however, they are still in the same culture). A Nerd is someone who is completely immersed in the knowledge of a specific topic or various ones. A geek is someone completely led by their passions or hobbies (think of fandoms, *Star Wars* geeks, Trekkies). However, these days, the terms nerd and geek collide. Nonetheless, a Blerd is a resistive term in itself, Black

Nerds use this term to say I am a nerd, but I am still Black. Blerds often struggle to "fit in" due to nerdiness and/or geekiness not fitting in with the hegemonic ideal of Blackness, especially media representations (Law II, 2017; Vortia, 2017). The Awkward Black Girl *can* function in the same way as a nerd, and she probably has the appearance of a nerd or a geek. Moffitt and Henderson discuss 90s and contemporary Awkward Black Girls in sitcoms, and almost all of them feature physical and internal personality traits of what is dominantly thought of when we think nerd: braces, the mix, and matching of different prints, natural curly hairstyles, quirky responses and reactions, and sexually/romantically naïve (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). However, in *Abbott Elementary*, with Janine, there is not just the appearance of a Blerd, or being a social outcast/racial other. There is the intersectionality of being Awkward, Black, and a Girl.

Black

The Awkwardness for Janine has a performative aspect. To be Awkward it means to do something without *ease.* Janine performs as her authentic, quirky, and unique self without an actual awareness that she is different. This makes for hilarious, sitcom-familiar situations. However, the awkwardness comes from Janine's inability to perform hegemonic ideals of *Blackness* with ease. Hegemonic Blackness can be defined through what the media displays and what culture enforces, this could be talking in African American Vernacular, having natural rhythm and ability to dance, a specific style of clothing that matches hip-hop culture, etc. To be "Black" is to be "down". It is the "antithesis to the stereotypical White male nerd" (Kendall, 2011; Law II, 2017).

Girl

Her other colleagues such as Gregory and Jacob function and appear as nerds themselves. However, what separates Janine from the cluster of geek culture at *Abbott Elementary* is the tension and struggle to perform the popular and ideal version of what it means to be a Black woman. The Awkward Black Girl is a resistive script compared to dehumanizing and limiting representations of Black women in the past. The Awkward Black Girl tethers aspects of a Blerd, awkwardness, and authentic Black femininity.

This awkwardness can be defined through the Awkward Black Girl's traits that blur social, cultural, and political social norms (Bradley, 2015; Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). These traits could be sexual nativity, natural hairstyles, needing to be "schooled" on Black culture, and facial expressions. Out of these traits, there has been a focus in scholarship on the importance of awkwardness and sexual naivety (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020; Sobande, 2019; Bradley, 2015; Levy, 2021).

Quirkiness allows for experiences of validation, relatability, and intimacy (Adams, 2021). Quirky characters are able to embody "dominant ideology while preserving an authenticity that distinguishes themselves" (Adams, 2021, pg. 5). Notably, Black feminist scholar Regina Bradley (2015) argues that quirky is akin to "cute." She argues that quirkiness is a limited style of representation because quirky characters are often just cute, and present traits that are little "hiccups" that are celebrated. Instead, when discussing Black womanhood in the media, we should use awkward. Bradley argues that using the term "awkward" allows for identifying and mapping out when voices and actions do not line up with the community at large. It allows us to go deeper in analysis (Bradley, 2015). So, while the Awkward Black Girl could have quirky responses, as identified by Moffitt and Henderson, according to Bradley this is not her full

embodiment, but just an aspect that turns her into a lovable character. Bradley's assertion of quirkiness caused me to think about the disrupting nature of awkwardness, and how awkwardness works in my own analysis of the script.

Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought is a critical social theory that will give me a theoretical lens for this project. Black feminist thought takes elements and themes of Black women's culture and "infuses them with new meaning" (Collins, 1989). It is a way of rearticulating African American knowledge, giving Black women a way to create new definitions that validate Black women's experiences and standpoints. An approach to using Black feminist thought is Black female spectatorship. bell hooks (1992) urges Black female spectators to challenge and critique the images they see on screen to resist stereotypical images the media distributes. This is how we can advocate for media representations that go beyond Controlling images as well as receive viewing pleasure when we go to the cinema or watch television (Collins, 2002; hooks, 1992).

Furthermore, In *The Whites of Their Eyes*, Stuart Hall (1995) asserts that the media plays a dominant part of forming the ideologies society lives by. The media does this by creating images and "representations of the social world images, descriptions, explanations, and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work (1995, p. 19 - 20). This explains for why the controlling images that Collins presents have a dominant effect on racist ideologies of Black women. Therefore, the television representation of Black women present the power to contribute to ideologies audiences and society form about Black women.

These frameworks and approaches provide context for interpreting media messages and representation - and critically engaging with my lived experiences as a Black woman who relates

to the Awkward Black Girl. With Black feminist thought, I take scholarship and knowledge of Black women's representation and discuss the differences between this contemporary representation of Black women in *Abbott Elementary* through the Awkward Black Girl.

Methodology

For this project, I use textual analysis and autoethnography. Textual analysis is a way for researchers "to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world" (McKee, 2003, pg. 2). I use texts (a web clip or television episode) to make interpretations of the different meanings being communicated to the audience. A text is "something we can make meaning from" (McKee, 2003, pg. 4). In other words, through prolonged attention to patterns, objects and ideas within a text, a researcher is able to make meaning (Fürsich, 2009). As mentioned, Black feminist scholars such as Regina Bradley and Yael Levy, and specifically within Communication, Francesca Sobande, Kimberly Moffitt, and Tammy Sanders Henderson use textual analysis to examine how the Awkward Black Girl is performed as a trope within media representation. For my project, textual analysis helps me examine the way the Awkward Black Girl appears through speech, dress, and body language in *Abbott Elementary*.

In *Interrogating the Awkward Black Girl*, Moffitt and Henderson argue that the Awkward Black Girl is an extension of Patricia Hill Collins' controlling image and that the themes that create the ABG on-screen escape the limits of a controlling image. The authors define their relation to the ABG as Black feminist spectators and analyze four different texts, two 90's sitcom characters, and two contemporary sitcom characters. The authors found within their texts that these characters portray key elements of the Awkward Black Girl among their "facial expressions, quirky responses, sexual insecurity, being 'schooled' on Black culture, and Black hair" (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020).

These themes are found among various scholars discussing the Awkward Black Girl as a trope, rather than the script that I am offering. To understand the Awkward Black Girl as a script, it's important to understand the themes identified with the Awkward Black Girl as a trope considering these themes heavily inform my reading of the script.

Facial Expressions/Body Language

The Awkward Black Girl uses body language and facial expressions to conversate with others. A common sign of the Awkward Black Girl is in her unique ability to convey her lack of understanding of what others would consider normal or common-sense observations (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). Common expressions can be shock, bewilderment, wide eyes, and pouting. These facial expressions are often associated with white supremacist anti–Black caricatures, such as the Sambo, but the Awkward Black Girl uses these facial expressions to clue in that she does not fit in. She is given an "outsider-within status".

Quirky Responses/Anger

Sometimes, this character will have odd responses. These may even read as naïve sometimes, but it also makes them quite lovable because their sincerity is conveyed to the audience. Even in anger, they may have trouble expressing how they really feel and will do so with comedic one-liners. One instance is when J (Issa Rae) in *Misadventures of the Awkward Black Girl* and Issa Dee (Issa Rae) in *Insecure* have inner monologues releasing what they wish they could say. These characters are able to express their anger however, when they want to and how they want to (Bradley, 2015; Moffitt & Henderson, 2020).

Sexual Insecurity/Naivete

Among all of the various themes, this theme is discussed the most. Controlling images of Black women have represented the Black woman as naturally hypersexual and deviant. The

jezebel will usually pursue sexual relations despite social conventions (Levy, 2021). The jezebel trope exists in contemporary media in many representations of Black women. So, it is no surprise when the Awkward Black Girl comes into contact with the topic of sex, she appears unnatural, naïve, or shy about it. Allowing the Awkward Black Girl to be unsure about sex when other media representations portray the Black woman as naturally sexually confident or highly desiring of sex allows agency and humility for the Black woman being represented. This can be seen explicitly through a lack of knowledge about sex, insecurity/lack of ability to be honest about sex, or not being sure if this is something she really wants. The focus is on her emotions, hesitations, and her timing. She possesses awkwardness about the topic, instead of just being readily confident to engage in sexual relations without any context (Bradley, 2015; Levy, 2021; Moffitt & Henderson, 2020; Sobande, 2019).

"Schooled" on Black Culture

The Awkward Black Girl struggles to navigate an understanding of Black culture easily. Though she identifies as a Black woman, her interests, speech, and dress seem to deem her as "needing to be educated" about Black culture by others. In Insecure, Issa Dee (Issa Rae) is educated many times about Black culture. One example includes her wearing her natural hair and being told that wearing a weave is more culturally acceptable (Bradley, 2015; Moffitt & Henderson, 2020).

A key note is that most of the analysis of the 90's sitcom Awkward Black Girls feature actresses of a lighter skin tone. The lack of focus on how complexion has played a role in controlling images further highlights Issa Rae's contributions to the character, as she is a darker skinned millennial Black woman dominating the prototype (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020; Sobande, 2019). Usually, television has featured darker skin Black women as mammies,

matriarchs, and welfare queens. A stereotype that works to feature darker skin Black women as masculine, unpleasant, and asexual. This note of how colorism plays a role in how the Awkward Black Girl has been represented on screen is not mentioned often. A small note is that among this literature describing the Awkward Black Girl, as well as the Social Outcast (the male archetype of the Black nerd) these themes are often associated with not being able to depart from "respectability politics", which will be addressed further in the next chapter (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020; Morgan, 2016).

Mentioned previously, these themes are informing my analysis of the Awkward Black Girl as a script. A script differs from a trope. Janine performs the Awkward Black Girl through a set of scripts. These scripts are cultural messages that teach us how to perform our identity through our engagement with ourselves and others. Scripts are performed at different levels, cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic. Cultural scripts provide actors with "instructional guides", interpersonal scripts enable social actors to modify their behavior depending upon the people they are interacting with and intrapsychic scripts allow social actors to play out their private wishes and desires, like an "internal rehearsal" (Durham, 2014, pg. 85). Black feminist scholar Aisha Durham used these scripts to distinguish the way pop singer Beyonce Knowles performs Black female desirability in her hit music video "Single Ladies" (Durham, 2014). In this way, I use scripts instead of images or representations to emphasize the performative aspect of the Awkward Black Girl. The Awkward Black Girl's themes that are identified by Moffitt & Henderson focus on the form whereas analyzing Janine's scripts will allow examination of the why for her behavior. The mockumentary style of *Abbott Elementary* allows for us to see the performative aspect of the Awkward Black Girl, both literally and figurately. As the audience views the inner-city teachers throughout their day to day lives, we can see Janine performing for

the camera how she wants to be represented not only for herself and others around her but for the fictional audience that is at home watching their documentary. Janine is aware of how the world may view her.

Reviewing other analyses of the Awkward Black Girl provides context and helps me to explore the Awkward Black Girl as a script within my textual analysis. To explore how the Awkward Black Girl appears within the series I engage with 35 episodes, I select six scenes that best represent how the Awkward Black Girl is performed. However, a limitation of textual analysis is that it can take no account of the self. In other words, as Aisha Durham states in her chapter on Textual Experience - a method she offers in contrast to conventional, marketable, and privileged text-based methods - such as textual analysis are often "depersonalized and depoliticized" (2021, pg. 323). While I do not use textual experience, I find the same hurdle that Durham asserts in her chapter. Text-based methods that are "depersonalized and depoliticized to offer marketable skills in media and cultural studies do so at the risk of missing meaningful opportunities for liberatory transformation and transgressive self-revelation honed from critical inquiry, reflexivity, and rewriting/reenacting developed in autoethnography" (2021, pg. 323). In their essay, *Popular Culture Studies and Autoethnography*, Manning and Adams discuss how autoethnography can be used as a method to speak back to and critique popular media texts, as well as display how popular media texts have informed or constituted their social words and daily lives (2015).

Performances of the Awkward Black Girl have certainly caused me to reflect on my own life and the challenges I have faced. Autoethnography is one way to reflect upon media representation within academic Communication scholarship. Black feminist scholars have used autoethnography to resist and/or reflect on images they see on screen, such as Aisha Durham and

Robin Boylorn. Through Blackgirl autoethnography, Boylorn critically engages with her lived experiences and resists stereotypical notions of Black girlhood and womanhood (Boylorn, 2016). To resist these controlling images, she uses autoethnography to reject the negative images displayed in the media, urging others to think and look differently at the representations present on the screen (Boylorn, 2016). In *Home with Hip Hop Feminism*, Aisha Durham reflects upon her home with a series of performative autoethnography paired with essays that critically engage with popular and influential women in hip hop (Durham, 2014). Autoethnography is a tool that can be used to unpack lived experiences. By reflecting upon our own lives and the effect the media has had on our lives, we are able to share our stories and address the impact of the ideologies formed from the media's use of controlling images has had on Black woman's lives.

Critical autoethnography "shifts the gaze of/as Other toward cultural constructs, social circumstances, and oppressive inequalities to examine our lives as lived while critiquing" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p. 6). Black feminist scholars have used autoethnography to understand themselves and others through social circumstances (Boylorn, 2016). As they make themselves the participant in their field, they can examine their lived experiences to understand culture. Sometimes this field can be virtual, through examining personal electronic messages (Durham, 2020) or this could be allowing oneself to be angry while recalling a conversation with her son (Woodruff, 2022).

I use critical autoethnography to reflect upon my girlhood and womanhood in relation to the Awkward Black Girl as well as other mediated representations of Black girlhood and womanhood. I believe that my experiences as a young Black girl and now, a young adult woman were impacted by the representations of those who look like me. I struggled to find belonging, and a sense of self, and my relationships reflected the invisible string between my intrapsychic,

intercultural, and interpersonal scripts. Autoethnography is a chance to correct misrepresentations and distortions made by culture and provides the opportunity for the researcher to "engage with representations others have made of them" (Boylorn, 2008, pg. 414).

In the narrative, I reflect upon my life from girlhood to present (young adulthood), and use my own lived experiences to communicate how media representations have affected me throughout my lifespan up to this far. To do this, I embed personal memories and experiences – to "reconstruct the situated self concerning other bodies – real or imagined – within a particular context or historical moment to understand culture" (Durham, 2020, pg. 24). Blackgirl autoethnography will enable me to tell a story from a voice that is usually stifled (Boylorn, 2016). However, I am willing to critique and challenge these popular media images in contrast to my life and lived experience in order to resist stereotypical representations of Black girlhood and womanhood. Through this autoethnographic piece, I hope to be transparent, vulnerable, and self-questioning (Ellis, 2004). To display the parallels and the intentionality of my reading, I match themes within my autoethnographic story to the themes within the textual analysis. The story should follow how my relatability to the Awkward Black Girl matches with the performance that I analyzed, as well as other media representations that I have been impacted by. As I recall memories of my home, childhood, and early adulthood, I narrate stories of my life that were shaped by the media representations I and others around me consumed. Durham notes that autoethnography is the "mind-mining excavation of experience exhumed from buried field notes and dormant memories recovered to reconstruct one's self within a particular historical or cultural context" (2014, pg. 19). Through autoethnography, I am authentic, vulnerable, and honest in order to discuss social issues, media formed ideologies, and Black women representation.

Along with being transparent, comes with revealing stories that not only involve me, but involve others who I have met and still know today. As I reflect upon memories far away and still close, I have to consider ethical ways to include those stories within my research, imagining the people who I am writing about will read the piece (Ellis, 2004). For example, others may have issues with the way they are depicted within a work, or a researcher writing their own accounts may need to consider reputation though they are aiming to be authentic. In order to counter this, researchers can get individual approval of how they are written within your story, or their names could be changed. A personal check to make sure you are okay with what is being presented about you, and your story is necessary (Manning & Ellis, 2015; Edwards, 2021). I include stories from the past years as well as the present. For stories that feature others, I get the approval of select individuals. Individuals that are in my life at present will have a chance to approve of what I have written about them. Some individuals will not have a preview or consent due to either no communication as of the current date, or minor mentions. Select individuals will have their names changed or not fully revealed (fake names, not revealing last names). Though I hope my vulnerability will share a story that gives voice to the lived experiences of being an Awkward Black Girl, I realize that at the end of it all it is just my story and not necessarily others' experience.

Conclusion

The Awkward Black Girl is an emerging script within television that offers a new representation of Black womanhood. Though the ABG has existed since the 90s, Issa Rae's performance has become the dominant prototype of the ABG due to her national success, agency and production of the character she creates. Though the ABC show *Abbott Elementary* is fairly new, Quinta Brunson has been performing the Awkward Black Girl ABG since 2017. Patricia

Hill Collins' controlling images still exist today in contemporary media representations. In order to add to the subfield of critical cultural studies I ask these two questions: *How is the Awkward Black Girl a new media script of Black womanhood? How is the Awkward Black Girl represented in media? How do I experience the Awkward Black Girl in everyday life?*

Limited scholarship within Communication discusses the Awkward Black Girl, however most of the scholarship discusses Issa Rae's performance of the Awkward Black Girl. I introduce Quinta Brunson and her performance of the Awkward Black Girl into the discussion of Awkward Black Girl within Communication and critical cultural studies literature. With this project, I explore how speech, dress, and body language appear within the Awkward Black Girl script in *Abbott Elementary*.

Using the critical social theory Black feminist thought, I answer these two questions through an in-depth textual analysis of *Abbott Elementary.* Though I make note of Quinta Brunson's absence from the literature of performing the Awkward Black Girl, I acknowledge how new *Abbott Elementary* is. My second method for answering these questions is through the method of autoethnography. Though I hope my autoethnographic piece will be a shared light for many other Black girls whose voices have been silenced, I realize this does not actually account for another Black girl's voice and that my experience cannot be generalized.

With this project, I hope to spark more conversations around the importance of the Awkward Black Girl script, especially Quinta Brunson's contributions. I also hope to expand upon critical cultural studies work in the future by studying the different ways in which Black women are represented in contemporary media platforms, not just in television but on social media, film, and the music industry. Such scholarship works to resist oppressive images of Black women and could contribute to creating new and complex representations of Black women.

Chapter Overview

To answer my research questions, I use a dual-method approach. Autoethnography will come first to represent the lived experiences of an Awkward Black Girl and textual analysis follows. In the second chapter, I ask: *How do I experience the Awkward Black Girl in everyday life?* I answer this question with the use of critical autoethnography to examine the Awkward Black Girl in media representation and lived experience. I use stories of my life that reflect how speech, dress, and body language have been markers of my own awkwardness and how these aspects are a reflection of culture, class, and racial otherness. I understand the examples I explore in Chapter 3 because of my experience living these examples. My lived experiences are formed into a narrative that explores Black Vernacular English, popular culture at the time of my adolescence, and the implications of class, race, and gender and how this informed the popular culture media representations of Blackness I was engaging with. I find that how I perform my Blackness in everyday life is greatly impacted by the intersection of class, race, and gender – it is the same way for others in the Black community. I end the chapter with a new understanding of Black culture and Blackness in the media.

My third chapter uses textual analysis to examine how Janine Teague's performs the Awkward Black Girl as a script. I offer that Janine performs the Awkward Black Girl as a script rather than a trope. I argue that the Awkward Black Girl combines aspects of the Black Nerd/Geek and Black femininity to create a resistive representation that defies conformity to hegemonic representations of Black women – this performative aspect presents the televisual character as a script. I support this argument with a textual analysis of how the Awkward Black Girl script appears through speech, dress, body language and other identified themes in *Abbott*

Elementary. Social awkwardness, Black Vernacular English, and rhythmic inability result in instances of social isolation and lack of solidarity with other Black characters. Awkwardness causes disruption in the way we see Janine in regards to the representation of Black womanhood in relation to other Black characters. The Awkward Black Girl script is offered as a transformative, non-monolithic tool that can be used by filmmakers and researched by scholars to create space for complex representations of Black womanhood.

My fourth chapter restates my research questions, addresses my conceptualizations of blackness and racial performance, and discusses my research findings. A new conviction of what it means to be authentically Black is shared along with acknowledgment of privilege and the importance of solidarity within the Black community. I end the chapter by addressing how my thesis contributes to Communication, Black Feminist thought, critical cultural studies, and media studies. After a brief discussion of limitations, I provide ways in which these limitations can be addressed but also future research possibilities for me as a scholar and others within Black feminist media studies.

CHAPTER TWO: THAT *IS* ME I SEE ON TV

"Sit *down*" Janine says firmly to the group of rowdy students on the school bus. She promptly turns back in her seat and sits down. Briefly, she looks to Mrs. Howard, her mentor and co-worker, and smiles after she sees her evolution in controlling her classroom was approved by the more experienced teacher. I can't help but smile at the last scene in the first season of *Abbott Elementary*. This entire season I have never related to a character as much as I have since *Insecure*. Like Janine, I too have had many of the moments we see Janine having in the show. Especially when I taught 2nd grade over the summer. My good friend – who referred me for the job – had told me many times that I needed to "put my foot down". As I had had enough of the disrespect, I firmly told a kid who had been testing me all summer "sit down, now" in almost the same way, maybe even a bit harsher. Almost immediately, I heard my friend in the background go "mmmhmm" in a tone that approved me finally putting my foot down. I often failed to respond and act in the same ways as the Black community I had around me to situations at a given time. Situations can sometimes turn *awkward.*

In this chapter, I use critical Black feminist autoethnography to reflect upon my experiences of the Awkward Black Girl at home and school (Durham, 2020; Boylorn 2008, Griffin, 2012). I recall moments when I failed to perform hegemonic blackness through the ways I talked, dressed, and danced. You will notice I refer to hegemonic blackness several times throughout this thesis. By this I mean what is dominantly perceived to be the Black experience and how Black people perform their identities in their everyday lives. This is often heavily

portrayed in the media and reinforced by the Black community. I reference Black popular images and rescript my awkward moments at the intrapsychic, intercultural, and interpersonal levels not only to recount those visceral interactions that my body still remembers but also to challenge cultural misrepresentations (Boylorn, 2008, pg. 414). This critical Black feminist autoethnography is important because it addresses how I struggled to find a sense of my Black self, and speaks to racial belonging of other Black girls and women who look like me.

Representations of Black women, also known as controlling images, have typically been mammies, hoochies, welfare queens, and matriarchs (Collins, 2002). These have manifested anywhere from the Aibileen Clarks (mammy), Claire Huxtables (matriarch), and Tasha Macks (matriarch) to less obvious forms of stereotypical images and tropes like Oliva Pope and Annaliese Keating, as scholars have uncovered hidden tropes such as the mammy and jezebel guised within modern show-stopping leads of contemporary television series. These representations are also seen in music, where fierce divas like Beyonce, Rihanna, and Alicia Keys top the Billboard charts across genres. Boss chicks like Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, and Megan Thee Stallion are seen as hegemonic representations of Black womanhood. Black womanhood is hegemonically represented as being either a City Girl or a strong independent career woman like Olivia Pope. Rapper Cardi B took to social media to defend herself against the claims that female rappers insist on only rapping about their sexual selves. To this, she made it clear that she raps about what sells, and the records that detailed her experiences about her innermost emotions and feelings did not sell as much as songs "rapping about her p****" (Saponara, 2019). Each of them have their own talent, drive, and stature – however I never quite saw myself in them. To the outsider, they do not know this, and I have been expected to perform hegemonic representations of Black womanhood. Their stature leaves no room for failures, hiccups, or being somewhere in between. The Awkward Black Girl lives

somewhere in between. Somewhere in between the "boss chick", or and the "strong Black woman" is just a girl – who doesn't quite fit in to either one.

To explore the lived experiences of an Awkward Black Girl, I recall six vignettes throughout my life that were triggered by my rewatching of the series, *Abbott Elementary*. The moments that I chose will reflect upon instances in which my speech, dress, and body language capture the essence of the Awkward Black Girl off-screen. As Durham states "Autoethnography is a mind-mining excavation of memory" (pg. 24, 2020). These moments from my memory speak to what it means to be somewhere in between. As discussed in the Introduction, these moments also allow me to examine how awkwardness works in my relationship with self (intrapsychic), others (interpersonal), and culture (intercultural). The Intrapsychic and intercultural levels reveal my own daily performance of the Awkward Black Girl script. In the narrative that follows, it will read as my thoughts were at various ages. Starting from girlhood to present, I recover lost memories to present as the analysis for how I performed the Awkward Black Girl script in my own life.

Narrative

Speech

Bey Like Beyonce (age 12)

The way I talk is natural for me. They say the way I talk is proper, uppity, or that I'm trying to be White. But I don't think that way. I never thought much about how I spoke until others pointed it out. Why should I change the way I speak to make others comfortable around me? Why do I have to put others at ease, when I am not trying to attack? Sadly, this line of thinking has gotten me nowhere – I have little to no Black friends, and most of the Black kids here can't stand me. It doesn't matter if I raise my hand to say the answer to the equation is 21, or if I complimented

another Black girl's hair. I have become the epitome of judgment in their eyes. My mom tells me it's not me, and it's them, and I have to choose to ignore it. She says she experiences the same thing as I do, amongst adults. My dad tells me I have to change the way I speak – to put others at ease. In fact, he thinks I am mimicking White people, just like them. But that's my daddy, and he loves me. He doesn't reject me or look down on me, even though he shares the same opinion.

I noticed that in all the movies where the Black characters talk like me, they're seen as uppity, mean, stuck up, and "boujee". In Daddy's Little Girls (2007), *the smart, accomplished lawyer played by Gabrielle Union is a tyrant almost, looking down on the small town, humble car driver that Idris Elbis plays. Her friends look down on him and call him "ghetto" and "street". In* Soul Food (1997)*, Vanessa Williams plays a sophisticated lawyer, who's too much of a priss. She's angry, jealous, and seen as the greedy one in the family. On top of that, I'm also just a nerd. I often am honest about all the little things and interesting facts I learn. The fact that I like to read means I'm lame, and weird. I'm considered strange.*

To the Tick Tock, and it – Nope. Just Stop. (Age 17)

African American Vernacular, or Black Vernacular English. Black Vernacular English is a type of English that uses semantics, grammar, pronunciation, and speaking patterns derived from African American culture. Black Vernacular English is derived from when the language formed due to the experience of enslaved African American descendants (Richardson & Ragland, 2018). It's something I've learned to speak this whenever I want to appeal or fit in. Laughter, smiles, and warmth, is the applause for the performance I have to put on. Very few people accept me naturally for the way I am. Once I see my natural self is not working, I try to study the people around me. My father was right, it puts others at ease. It's not that I never use Black Vernacular English naturally – I am an African American girl who has been well educated and immersed into

the roots, celebrations, and importance of Black culture. I grew up hearing and speaking Black Vernacular English within my own home. I just don't speak Black Vernacular English solely and predominantly. So, as my father says I "code switch". I would like to use the word perform – and it works. If you perform well.

But it doesn't guarantee. I still shrink myself in rooms where I know I am the Other, the outsider, the nerdy Black girl. Now I am finding that there are moments when I am parts of myself, I just have to choose carefully when I am around others. When I'm with my Black friends, I can belt the chorus of "Love" by Keyshia Cole. I can use Black colloquialisms I grew up hearing from my mother who was raised in the deep South, or street slang from my father who grew up in the city projects. I can quote lines from Love and Basketball *and* The Color Purple*, and no one looks at me in confusion. When I'm around my White friends I can dance to "Death of a Bachelor" by Panic at the Disco, geek out to* Stranger Things *and discuss all the theories and rabbit holes, and do all of the things that mark me as other around my Black friends. I'm not sure why I can't do both, and still be considered Black. I am either "trying to be White" or I am "acting rachet".*

I've learned certain aspects of Black culture simply by watching music videos, BET*, and* VH1. *A new series,* Gucci Mane and Keyshia Ka'Oir: The Mane Event (2018) *comes on TV one night after school. I'm invested now, not because of the shiny cars, and the pretty wedding decorations, but the love story itself. There's this song they keep playing, it's romantic, and it sounds like a traditional R&B song.*

"We ride, we ride, we ride

We ride, we ride, we ride

We ride

We ride

Even when it don't go right, even when the s*** goes left

Even when my arms can't fight we ride"

The lyrics sound weird coming out of my mouth, but I don't know that until I casually start singing the lyrics around my friends Kasia and Lauren.

"Kendra, you listen to Gucci?" Kasia says, looking at me with pure curiosity.

"Yeah, really just that one song"

They both laugh, knowing when the lyrics were repeated out of my mouth, they sounded a little awkward. It's not normal for me to recite rap lyrics. I'm reminded that I'm not fooling anyone when I ask my friend Lauren if I should go to Florida Agricultural Mechanical University, a historically Black college and university in Tallahassee, Florida. I wanted to be like the kids in A Different World. *She quickly reminds me of my performance I think no one sees:*

"Kendra, no. Stay your butt away from there. You not gon' fit in."

She says it with seriousness, a hint of comedy, but genuine care. The statement shocked me, but it also comforted me. It felt like for the first time, somebody saw me for me.

I am someone who identifies as a Blerd, which is a resistive statement in itself – a Black nerd. To be studious, dorky, uncool, and socially/sexually naïve all the while being Black is not deemed acceptable by other in the Black community and is highly underrepresented in the media (Law II, 2017). Nerds often have to codeswitch to speaking Black Vernacular English.

Black Vernacular English is a style of speaking derived from the experience of U.S. slave descendants (Richardson & Ragland, 2018). For Black individuals, how we speak is tied to how

others may see us (Alim & Smitherman, 2012). If you speak Black Vernacular English/Ebonics, you are seen as "ratchet" by White peers, thus, all the more reason to speak BVE when in community with other Black individuals. Language ties our community together and creates solidarity (Richardson & Ragland, 2018; Payne, 2020). African American Vernacular, or Black Vernacular English is *not* inferior to other English-based languages, such as Mainstream American English, it is a culturally derived language that ties our community together and creates community. It is only deemed as inferior due to a long-standing systematic oppression that labels Blackness and Black culture as less than.

So, I learned how to code-switch. Black nerds who fail to code switch fail to "assess the needs of the setting (the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose) and intentionally choose the appropriate language style for that setting" (Law II, 2017). Though initially I failed, I quickly learned how to change my speaking to make others feel comfortable around me. Realizing that I spoke in a way that was deemed acceptable among White peers, my Black peers who spoke with Black Vernacular English as their default may have seen this as some type of betrayal, or assumed that I was exalting myself over them, like the historical patterns of the Black Bourgeoisie (Law II, 2017). The Black Bourgeoisie are a subset group of Black middle class who were criticized for excluding others in the Black community based off of class, skin complexion, and hair texture. Media representations of the Black middle class often represent them as uppity, snobbish, and looking down on others who are not middle class. So, if I did not speak BVE, this may code to others as my rejection of Black culture. Is it an option to consider that my Black peers exclusion of me was a way of protecting themselves from the unknown?

For my Black peers regardless of their class, code-switching might take on a different meaning due to how power comes into consideration. Those who do not speak Black Vernacular

English can move throughout spaces and be seen as "respectable". This is why I am able to speak Black colloquiums from the South and street slang from the city and this not be a marker of class around my Black peers. To my Black peers, we were speaking a universal language that binds us together, regardless of where we came from. In front of my White peers, however, it is common for those who want to be deemed as respectable to conform to middle-class respectability (Durham, 2012). Using Black Vernacular English is considered to be "acting rachet". Black culture in general seems to be labeled as "ratchet". The term ratchet refers to embodied behaviors of loudness, outspokenness, and highly expressive. It has been considered a "classed performance of cool" (Pickens, 2015). "How Black folk are heard makes a big difference in how Black folk are perceived" (Alim & Smitherman, 2012). In this case, my Black peers, our Black culture, were labeled as ratchet due to the *unfamiliarity* of Black Vernacular English. To me, I may have felt and have been marked as an Other but to my Black peers were marked and seen as Others by my White peers. My duality, performance and class enables me to move from Other, Other within an Other, to *in*. It is not that White people are without class, it is that Whiteness is deemed as the dominant standard for which we measure performances of the Other.

Dress

Swag Surfin' (12)

I think I look cute today. I thought I looked cute today. My mom says I look cute, and so does my dad. Apparently, my style is "wack", and "weird", and I dress like a bum. I look around at the girls who are dressed like me. I like bright, vibrant, colorful clothing. For so long we had to dress in white, navy blue, and light blue.

I look around me, and the people who look like me are dressed head to toe in what people call swag. *Jordans, Converse, Vans, Addidas, Pumas, or stylish chic sandals. Gold bamboo earrings and their shoes always matched their shirt.*

I don't understand until I hear a song on the bus ride home. The bus driver always plays 93.7 The Beat, where they play R&B, hip hop, and soul. A new song emerges, where they describe the way to be:

" I'm Smokin' On Dat Purp.! My Shoes Match My Shirt.! I Got A Bad B**** & She Know Dat I'm Da s***. (Dat Mean...)

I'm On It.! (Ayy.!)"

My shoes match my shirt, my shoes match my shirt*. It suddenly clicked. I observe a light skinned Black girl who seems to gain acceptance from our peers. She's not just wearing Red Air Jordans, her shirt is red too. Her jeans correlate with her shoes and shirt, so the colors dance with each other. Another boy is wearing green and white Adidas, with a green t-shirt that has the Adidas logo on it. I look down at my fluttery deep ocean-blue skirt and light blue polo shirt. My shoes of choice today are Black Airwalks that mimic the style of Converse. The brand names and the sneakers are all new to me – I've never been concerned about them before. The lack of top brand name sneakers I wear also sets me apart as different.*

Big Bird (Age 17)

Bright, yellow, fuzzy, and colorful. Something I dared not to wear since I was 12. It was not the usual choice for me to boldly wear my first pick, but today I didn't care. I happily slipped the bright yet slightly warm cardigan on that morning and pulled up my dark green cargo capris. I put creamy white pearl studs in my ears and fixed my hair.

Once I get to class that morning, I'm met with a line of questions.

"What are you wearing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why the yellow sweater? With the shoes?"

I look down at my blue, denim-colored Toms-style shoes. I thought I looked cute.

Needless to say, I did not wear that sweater again, fearing that I would face the humiliation and bullying of my younger days.

A part of the Awkward Black Girls' positionality can be class (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). In my story, class is to be considered highly when it comes to discussing the ways power has contributed to this narrative. I grew up in the middle-class suburbs to two white-collar professionals. My mother is a CPA and my father is a General Contractor. Both of them worked to give me a childhood that would be the opposite of their own in terms of their experiences financially. The way I spoke and dressed was afforded to me physically but also mentally. My mind did not even worry about showing others my financial status, because I never worried about my financial visibility. My personality, way of dressing and expression of self was directly derived from my upbringing.

Class is a distinction in how Black women are represented in the media (Durham, 2014). The politics of respectability can impact levels of self-expression. The politics of respectability references how Black women are expected to embody "middle-class values, ideologies, behaviors, and dress" (Payne, 2020). By adhering to respectability politics, Black communities assimilate into dominant ideologies to be respected by the dominant society (Payne, 2020). To be respectable is

to be middle–class (Durham, 2012). For those who do not express themselves adhering to middle-class ideologies, they are not accepted and are labeled "ratchet". The term often had a negative connotation and often women who are loud, outspoken, and expressive within Hip Hop and pop culture are labeled as such. Scholars who study ratchet respectability have since used the term to empower Black women to reclaim the term and dare to be authentic (Payne, 2020).

For Black people who are being their most authentic selves, regardless of how they speak, how they dress, or their personal interests, we are either automatically labeled ratchet or bougie. This automatic labeling is done by those of us within the Black community and by those outside of the Black community. Just because some of my Black peers authentic selves aligned with what I perceived as hegemonic Blackness, does not mean it was not authentic as well. Hegemonic Blackness is tied to the media, and the media has depicted Blackness as a monolith. In an episode of *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1990 – 1996),* Will, the main character and his cousin Carlton attempt to enter into a Black fraternity (Vinson et al., 1993). After going through the hazing and initiation process, the president of the fraternity, Phi Beta Gamma, delivers the news to Will that Carlton did not make it in due to his lack of similarity to Will, who is the cool, down, bad boy. Carlton is a geek, he has quirky sayings, lacks rhythmic dancing (see "The Carlton" dance), and is extremely studious. At the same time, he is deeply privileged in his identity as coming from a highly educated upper-class family, living across the street from famous Hollywood producers. After the president calls Carlton a sell-out, Carlton replies "Being Black is not what I am trying to be, it's what I am". His Blackness was defined by the ability to be cool, have swag, and be the "Fresh Prince". Like Carlton, aspects of my personality translated that I was a "sellout" because I failed to perform what the dominant culture and the media says that Blackness is.

Whiteness is unmarked. As performance scholars Christopher McRae & JT Warren state, it is "slippery" (McRae & Warren, 2012, 61). Because of the "shape-shifting tendencies of Whiteness", one never knows enough about it (McRae & Warren, 2012, 61). Whiteness can be unmarked, unclassed, and undefined, and yet remain dominant. This is why groups of the Other, are often marked, classed, and defined. This is why when I think "I'm not sure why I can't do both, and still be considered Black". Blackness has not been given the same shape-shifting tendencies. The reason why I have not been able to "do both", and still be considered Black by my peers, is because Blackness has been marked, classed, and defined under the ideologies produced and compared to by the shape-shifting that Whiteness often does. Similar to colorism, which is the discrimination in preference of those with a light skin complexion, the Black community has reinforced these oppressive ideologies. However, I believe the reinforcement is done in resistance. It is an attempt to build solidarity, to fight back against a system that wishes to define everything in accordance to the shape-shifting ideal of Whiteness.

Body Language (Dance)

Once Upon a Time, In a Far-Off Kingdom, I Failed to do the Electric Slide.

"Five, Six, Seven, Eight!"

"Into the woods, you go again

You have to every now and then

Into the woods, no telling when

Be ready for the journey"

"Alright, stop! Let's go again. We need to over the middle section."

I wish we were doing Dreamgirls.

"Kendra! You know how to do the electric slide right?"

"Uh…sure?"

No, Bob. I've had my Black Card Revoked for times such as these.

"Okay, that's what this little part where you all transition into a chorus is modeled after. Can you show us?"

The Best Man, The Best Man, The Best Man……tastes like candy? But what are they actually doing in that scene? Like how do they move their feet? You can't be the only Black person here and don't know the electric slide.

I move forward away from my place and start to attempt to show the electric slide. My right foot steps forward, followed by my left. "I think it's this way…", I shyly say.

Wait a minute, why did he assume I knew…..I mean, I know why he assumed I knew. And I could have let my pride go.

Bob, the choreographer for our school musical laughs slightly. Into the Woods was a good pick, but my mind often wanders to two years prior, when the school performed Hairspray. Apparently, the Black cast had to teach themselves all the dance moves and were left to their own devices. Bob spent most of the time with the White cast.

"That's okay, Kendra. Kinda surprised you don't know how to do it?"

Okay, thanks!

"Yeah, listen I tried my best."

"You don't know how to do the electric slide?" My friend Martha asks.

No, dang girl didn't you just see me fail?

"Martha, you're doing it pretty good. Can you come and show us?"

Martha comes forward and starts to demonstrate how to correctly do the reconditioned electric slide.

I'm embarrassed. Not just because I couldn't do the electric slide, but because my White friend knew how to dance better than me. She literally just has more swag and rhythm than me, something that is supposed to be a part of me being Black.

I thought I was far removed from this. I'm in the 11th grade now, we should be over this. Besides, be grateful none of the other Black kids were here to see that.

If you turn on the radio or the TV, there are pop sensations like Ariana Grande, Adele, and reality television stars like Kim Kardashian that make being Black cool. They make it look so easy – and the worst of it all is that I love it. I find myself dancing to the number one hits and procrastinating on homework when reruns of Keeping Up with the Kardashians (2007 – 2021) *appear on cable. I don't tell Martha that when we binge-watch Ariana Grande's music videos, I secretly hate it. The hair, the makeup, the nails, the way she speaks, the genre of music she chooses to sing, it all replicates the way I am expected to be, yet I am not. It seems as though Ariana is performing to be what she knows is cool.*

Kendra Williams Presents…. The Famous One-Act! (Age 17)

Old tricks play out. I've started to grow tired of rehearsal. I've started to grow tired of memorizing lines. It's a weird feeling – to be burnt out at the high school level already. I look around at my classmates and see them running behind the stage and procrastinating when

they're supposed to finish painting the set. I'm tired – my body is tense, my stomach is rattled in knots, and my attitude towards performing has reached its limit.

I remember the blinding light when my scene partner and I heard our cue. Arm in arm, we step onto the stage. As we entered center stage, I couldn't see the audience. All I saw was a black abyss and bright, white, blinding lights. The nerves that I felt (and did before every performance) left my body. I no longer could feel the knot in my stomach, all I could feel was my body and lips moving to what my brain had memorized all these weeks before in preparation. Every move was planned, coordinated, cool, and collected. I heard the audience laugh when we said our lines on cue, and an internal check mark went odd in my brain. The purpose of our performance was to make the audience laugh – the audience's loud cackles were confirmation that was succeeded in our performance.

Back then I thought the ache was senioritis. I realize now the ache was not just senioritis. It was an internal ache. It was a signal that it was time to return backstage, and put not just the character for the one act away, but the character I created away. It was time to take a final bow and put away the self that longed to please those around me. I was exhausted of performing in my everyday life. I was exhausted of trying to be accepted and live up to an expectation. Their applause and uproar are your signal that they approved, and even though they know you are playing a part, it's so good that they forgot for the time that you were on the stage.

Not knowing how to dance is one of the many but prominent ways to get your Black Card Revoked (Coleman, 2018; Carter, 2020). A Black Card is a fictional certification that someone is indeed "Black". To be black is to embody attributes that align with Black culture: knowing how to move your body, dressing with swag, and liking the Black film classic *Friday (1995).* It is not meant to be serious, and many times if your Black Card is revoked, it's done in

jest. However, often it is done to shame and humiliate (Coleman, 2018). Fear of one's Black card getting revoked in the spirit of shame and humiliation leads to racial performance.

Racial performance is a guise and leaves little room for diversity in ways of thinking about Blackness. The same way class is a distinction in how Black women are represented in the media, racial performance is also classed, if you are to be respected you are to be "a lady", which is a Black woman who is advised to adhere to respectability politics in order to be respected (Durham, 2014). In *Home with Hip Hop Feminism*, Aisha Durham identifies sexual scripts used by Grammy award-winning artist Beyonce in her famous "Single Ladies" music video, The Lady and The Freak (2014). The Lady and the Freak are classed as well, to be a lady you are to be college-educated, sexually chaste, and adhere to middle-class respectability. The Freak is often associated with a "strained working-class sexuality" (Durham, 2014, 85). Or, if you are not middle class, you have deemed the term "rachet". This term has been given to Black individuals who do not adhere to respectability politics but also it is given to those who are in the working class (Pickens, 2015). Though I received treatment from my White peers that deemed me as an Other, my class slowed me to move in between these groups and not be considered "ratchet". I was meek, known as the Christian sexually chaste good girl, and I came from two parents who were business owners – like Beyonce. There are parts of my backstage self that are deemed as acceptable because of my class. Though I was struggling to fit in, my class afforded me the privilege to be in spaces that others could not. As McRae & Warren note that Whiteness is slippery, in "Behind Beats and Rhymes", Durham asserts that class for her is slippery. "At any given moment it can convey economic status, legitimate racial authenticity, mark special identity, and dictate gendered modes of being in the world" (Durham, 2014). My class was a vehicle for me to move in between my Black peers and my White peers. Those who were also

Black, a girl, and middle class did not have the same struggles with fitting in due to their lack of awkwardness and nerd identity.

Despite performances of what Blackness is in the media, or reinforced ideologies within the Black community, Blackness is *not* a monolith. However, these performances of Blackness or "reps" to the culture can provide a sense of community. In an interview with the NYC-based radio show *The Breakfast Club*, R&B artist USHER speaks about his intentionality in representing culture everywhere he goes. "I bring the culture of what I am and what has made me who I am everywhere I go" (2024). "Even right now, you don't even realize it's happening right now". Jess Hilarious, a co-host on the show says "look behind him!!". Behind USHER, is the famous "Colored Entrance" portrait by photographer Gordon Parks. So that everyone who cannot see is not mistaken, USHER cuts off Charlemagne in the middle of his next question with "Gordon Parks, everyone. Just so you know. It's the culture" (2024). Gordon Parks, *Life* magazine's first African American photographer, is known for taking photographs of Black lives and revealing important aspects of American culture. He became one of the most prominent voices of the civil rights movement (Fulleylove). Black is not just staged entertainment, it is empowerment. Black art is a way for Black people to resist, reclaim, challenge oppressive ideologies, and just a way for us to tell our stories. USHER later goes on to say, in the same interview "We got to handle our icons the right way", he smiles, "This is a moment for the culture. Because they'll surely forget about us" (2024). Black art is seen as "the culture" because of its historical power in resisting oppression and erasure. So, when I fail to "represent the culture" and speak our language, subconsciously it translates to "I am not with you." I am failing to represent the culture that Black people have worked so hard to create, so that our message is heard.

I am someone who identifies as a Blerd, which is a resistive statement in itself – a Black nerd. To be studious, dorky, uncool, and socially/sexually naïve all the while being Black is not deemed acceptable by other in the Black community and is highly underrepresented in the media. The awkwardness comes from the way I speak, dress, and move my body. A Black nerd has to put on the performative other self that fits what is considered hegemonic Blackness. Black nerds often deal with internalized racism, wanting to belong, but seeing that their version of authentic Blackness will not allow them to be accepted (Law II, 2017). In order to learn how to perform hegemonic Blackness, I began to observe the media and make a direct correlation to what my peers expected out of me. This media's pedagogical effect later granted me a sense of acceptance and saved me from further bullying. However, in late adolescence, the sense of performance was beginning to catch up with me, as I danced with the thought of the authentic self and the performed Other.

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I thought I could relate to Issa Dee in *Insecure*. If that was relatability then this is…. something else. I have never laughed, or smiled, at a character so much. Janine is just a geek – her clothes, her personality, the way she can't dance, the way she struggles to relate or fit in. She's a racial outsider and though this is never specifically said, there are implications, words, and performances from the other characters that make this very clear. At least, clear to *me*.

Conclusion

I struggled to see my awkwardness for a very long time. Choosing to acknowledge my awkwardness, was also choosing to acknowledge that I probably will not fit in anywhere I go.. Seeing my awkwardness meant I had to see me, and for a long time, that's something I tried very

hard to not do. I was and am awkward. I can be socially awkward at times, but also awkward because my body causes disruption. My body is used to perform my identities daily, and this performance causes disruption in the sense that I do not fit the expectations that hegemonic or normative media representations of Blackness place, but also culturally and socially I do not fit in. Blackness is not a monolith, and cannot be a monolith despite the performances of Blackness the media says are acceptable.

To reflect upon the lived experiences of an Awkward Black Girl, I use a set of six vignettes that detail how my speech, dress, and body language created awkwardness in my daily situations. The media's depictions of Blackness created a hegemonic Blackness that was to be performed by me in order to avoid exclusion. I use Critical Autoethnography to resist a hegemonic Blackness that only boxes those within the Black community in. Through critical autoethnography and intentional consideration of how class, Whiteness, and the media inform ideologies of race. I end the narratives with my current outlook on Blackness, my identity, and the Awkward Black Girl. I encourage other Black feminist media scholars to use autoethnography to think about the ways in which their own performances of self have collided with the expectations the media and the society has placed upon them. Awkwardness is not just limited to the set of traits. Awkwardness is just a bridge for our bodies to cause disruption. How does your own awkwardness cause disruption to empty stereotypical representations made of you? How can you use your own lived experiences to speak back to those representations?

CHAPTER THREE: MS. TEAGUES: THE QUINTESSENTIAL AWKWARD BLACK GIRL AS NEW RACE GENDER SCRIPT IN *ABBOTT ELEMENTARY*

"Bye, Mom. I'm sorry. Ms. Howard. Bye, Ms. Howard," said Janine Teagues, an Abbott Elementary school teacher played by Philadelphia producer-writer-comedian Quinta Brunson. Embarrassed by her mistake, Brunson quickly looks up at the camera wearing her familiar brightly mismatched colored clothing, and her wide and doting eyes. In the ABC primetime sitcom *Abbott Elementary (2021 -),* Brunson reprises the notable character of the awkward Black girl. As a representation of young quirky Black women on late 1990s network television and early 2010s social media, the Awkward Black Girl (ABG) serves as a new race-gender script (Bradley, 2015; Durham, 2014; Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). The ABG that Brunson performs has the potential to resist dehumanizing controlling images of Black women by focusing on her awkwardness and by playing with moments of racial otherness to provide an alternative representation of Black televisual womanhood that stands outside of the mammy-jezebel archetype (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020).

Awkwardness adds dimension to the Brunson character. As analyzed by other Black feminist media scholars, as an Awkward Black Girl, Brunson's character brings tension, cringe, and duality to interpersonal interactions to resist media archetypes of Black women. This has been examined through TV sitcoms, social media, and online web series (Bradley 2015; Moffitt & Henderson, 2020; Sobande; 2019). In this chapter, I describe Quinta Brunson's character as the quintessential Awkward Black Girl. I explore how Brunson performs the new race-gender

script through speech, dress, and body language in the primetime mockumentary-sitcom *Abbott Elementary* (Einhorn, 2021). By providing a close textual reading of six scenes featuring the character Janine Teagues, I update the 1990s and 2010s archive about televisual blackness in media and cultural studies, I extend the conceptualization of the ABG identified by Kimberly Moffitt and Tammy Henderson (2020) to address it as a new script in communication studies, and I contribute to Black feminist studies about controlling images by introducing the Awkward Black Girl as a resistant script of young Black women.

Textual Analysis

Abbott Elementary is a mockumentary sitcom that follows inner-city Philadelphia school teachers in their day-to-day lives. The audience sees the teachers' challenges with students, government officials, and parents as well as their interpersonal dynamics with family and colleagues (Einhorn, 2021). Since the premiere of the series in late 2021, *Abbott Elementary* has gone on to be nominated for 7 Primetime Emmy awards, winning 3 Emmy awards at the end of the night. The show has received a viewership of ten million and a Rotten Tomatoes rating of 98% (Squires, 2023). Though the series started out with delayed viewing, that has quickly changed – the series is now ABC's most-watched comedy debut in more than four years. With such critical success and high viewership, *Abbott Elementary's* Janine Teagues (Quinta Brunson) has caught my attention. Quinta Brunson's character, Janine Teagues, is a fairly new teacher at the fictional Willard R. Abbott Elementary School, and with her bubbly personality, odd quips and optimistic solutions she offers support to her fellow colleagues but also her students.

Quinta Brunson is the creator, writer, and lead actress of *Abbott Elementary.* Brunson has had a similar origin story the original ABG Issa Rae, considering she also started her acting career after self-producing web series that received widespread recognition with an online

fanbase. Brunson's landed a job at *BuzzFeed Video* as a producer from her online work (Nwandu, 2023). Throughout the show, the audience is able to observe their behavior and feelings throughout the day, especially Janine (Einhorn, 2021). Like *Insecure*, *Abbott Elementary* features the main character as the quintessential Awkward Black Girl. Both Rae and Brunson are curators of the type of representation they want to see (Bradley, 2015; Ruff, 2022). With high viewership and an Awkward Black Girl as the lead, this series is important for its contribution to the script.

Abbott Elementary is shot using 'mockumentary' style filming, which gives direct access to Janine's embodiment of awkwardness. A mockumentary is a film or television episode that uses documentary-style filming techniques and applies satire to the subject of the film. The mockumentary style of filming allows for performances in sitcoms that are multi-layered. Mockumentaries address multiple audiences: the characters in which the "subjects" interact with, the camera crew, and the actual "ideal audience". These layers enable discourse of everyday performances (Schwind, 2014). Mockumentary discourse is analyzed in Kai Hanno Schwind's '*Chilled-out entertainers'*. Schwind argues that the layers of the camera in *The Office* play with notions of 'truthfulness'. Characters within the show perform in front of their coworkers, in front of the camera crew, and the actors are trying to portray authenticity for the ideal audience watching their characters (Schwind, 2014). In *Abbott Elementary,* we see the same type of awareness of the camera when teachers, staff, and students have confessional interviews or glance at the camera during situations. Each glance at the camera is a nonverbal way of communicating something important about what just happened in the scene. Still, the cameras follow the teachers around almost everywhere, and often it is implied characters are not aware of the camera. This can be seen when we see shadows over the camera lens, as to signify that the

camera crew is hiding, but also when characters are being filmed from far away, the camera will zoom in to where they are located, to signify that this is a conversation they are spying on. Out of all the characters, we see Janine's personal life the most, as the camera crew frequently visits her home, and surveils her when Janine is not hyper aware of the camera. Even when Janine is not aware of the camera, she still operates out of awkwardness. Thus, Janine's presence allows for Black womanhood to be discussed and up for view in a different light than it has before.

To interrogate this performance, I analyze Janine's performance over a series of six scenes that adhere to her presentation of speech, dress, and body language. The scenes are selected due to their ability to display the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts of awkwardness Janine performs in her day-to-day situations. The repeated patterns of what Moffitt & Henderson identified as a trope are seen through speech, dress, and body language. This analysis will allow me to attribute what constructs the Awkward Black Girl as a new race gender script, rather than a trope in *Abbott Elementary*.

Like Moffitt & Henderson, I embody certain aspects of the Awkward Black Girl myself. I am "simultaneously privileged and marginalized as a heterosexual woman of color raised in a middle-class environment, benefit from classism, and have worked to maintain the space of a middle-class environment my roots are from" (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020, pg. 107). I have been marked as an "other" within an Other because of my own racial outsiderness. My lived experience and positionality help inform my standpoint towards this analysis of the Awkward Black Girl. In this chapter, I argue that the Awkward Black Girl combines aspects of the Black Nerd/Geek and Black femininity to create a resistive representation that defies conformity to hegemonic representations of Black women – this is performed through a set of scripts. The scripts are revealed through Janine's speech, dress, and body language.

Analysis

Speech

One pattern among Awkward Black Girls notes is the repetition of quirky responses and lack of social cues, both of which Janine performs (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). This repetition of quirky responses and lack of social cues is performed through Janine's speech or the verbal expression of one's self and thoughts. Janine's awkwardness eventually seeps through as she attempts to navigate vernacular, slang, and colloquialisms with other Black characters. As Janine attempts to perform or assimilate, it causes awkwardness because of the proximity to her authentic self – which is far from what the other Black characters mark as "cool". In "Holiday Hookah" Erica, Janine's outside-of-work friend convinces Janine to come out to a Hookah club to kick off winter break. As Janine describes the plans in her confessional interview, her cultural and intrapsychic enhance her comedic yet telling performance (Season 2, Episode 10). With camera cuts between different classrooms celebrating winter break and Janine's solo interview, her voice details their plans. "This is my first single holiday, and Erika is gonna straighten my hair, and we got new clothes, and she says it's cold out and guys need something to 'rub up on'" (Season 2, Episode 10). As she narrates when mirroring Ericka's words it sounds awkward and flat. "So, we're going to go to a Hookah bar tonight. And who knows? Maybe I'll "hook" up with someone", pronouncing the latter word hook as it is pronounced in the first prefix of Hookah, *huuk*. The disruption in her speech comes from the transition between Janine performing hegemonic Blackness and authentic Blackness. Hegemonic Blackness refers to the ways in which blackness is largely represented in the media. As stated earlier, to be Black is to be "down" (Kendall, 2011). Erica is performing her own authentic Blackness, but her version

lines up with what is largely represented in the media but also in the series by other Black characters.

In her confessional, she continues with "But anyway, I'm just excited to get out of my work bubble and meet new people with my new look and get my 'ho' on." She stops abruptly, and says "Those are Erica's words, not mine. I'm a teacher." When Janine mimics Erica's words, it sounds forced yet comical. This tension but also comedic break comes from Janine's performance of her authentic blackness to performing the hegemonic representations of black femininity around her. Respectability politics refers to how Black women are expected to embody middle class values (Payne, 2020). Due to her position as a teacher in front of the camera, Janine may feel the need to adhere to respectability politics that align with middle class values, ideologies, behaviors and dress by presenting herself with civility, intelligence, and concealing her sexuality (Durham, 2012). Even though Janine adheres to respectability in this moment – by emphasizing those were not her words and mentioning that she is a teacher – the awkwardness displays the performative transition. Through Janine's dramatic transition of mirroring Erica's words to saying her own joke, her intrapsychic and cultural script work reveals her true authentic self and the self that she brings out in order to match the "cool" standard.

Her cultural script works to unveil the Awkward Black Girl in another layer. Sometimes the Black characters around her have to coach her into assimilation. Later that night, when they're waiting outside the club, Janine begins to get nervous that they won't be able to get in. To try to soothe Janine she says "Look we leaving Teacher Janine at home. Tonight, we getting turnt" Janine then agrees, saying "That's right. I'm Turnt Janine!" Erica quickly "schools" her on using her slang and vernacular with "Don't have to make it an adjective" (Season 2, Episode 10). Further signaling that Janine is outside of her "lane" anytime she attempts to perform the African

American Vernacular, colloquiums, and slang that other Black characters around her are speaking. Black or African American Language is a style of speaking "[mostly] English words with Black flava" (Richardson & Ragland, 2018, pg. 30). Black language comes from the experience of enslaved descendants. That experiences resulted "common speaking styles, systematic patterns of grammar, and common language practices in the Black community" (Richardson & Ragland, 2018, pg. 30). Language is a form of racial belonging within the Black community, and it brings those who are in the Black community together. Janine failing to speak African American Language with ease may signal to other Black characters around her that she is not solidary within the Black community. Cultural scripts work together to present the Awkward Black Girl. Janine's intrapsychic appears through her awkward pauses and redirections in speech, letting us know that she feels uncomfortable somehow with what she has just said. Her interpersonal is revealed with awkwardness when it comes to having to be "schooled" by her friends in the correct pronunciation of words and being fluent in Black language. At the intercultural level, Janine's apparent lack of knowledge of Black Language positions her as an "other".

Dress

Janine performs the Awkward Black Girl script through her self-expression of dress. Janine is constantly critiqued for her wardrobe, and throughout the series, we see the character in bright mismatched colors. Often, her colors don't match at all. When she steps out of the house, "she thinks she has hit it, but obviously she hasn't" (Hailu, 2022). Janine's school uniform of sorts is a dress or skirt that is coupled with a turtle neck or blouse and a long cardigan. With eccentric combinations, Janine's fashion frequently is called out by others around her. Janine's

style makes her awkward because it does not match the social conventions of others around her, specifically her Black friends and colleagues.

For example, Janine's quirky sense of style does not match what is considered the "norm" for those in the Black community. The other Black characters, like Erica, are usually dressed in apparel and hairstyles that are generally considered the norm for Blackness. Her boss Ava calls her out for a "lack of height, swag, and good outfits" while her work-mom and fellow teacher Barbara flat out asks "What on Earth are you wearing?" (Einhorn, 2021). Other Black women in the sitcom wear clothing and hairstyles, such dreadlocks, long hair, box braids, high buns, gold bamboo earrings, and bomber jackets. Janine fails to get the point. However, Janine's performance of the Awkward Black Girl is resistive to the ideology that in order to be Black or "down" as stated earlier, you have to fit hegemonic ideas and media representations of Black womanhood and femininity.

To examine this, on encounter is in an episode where the school dresses in Halloween costumes (Season 2, Episode 6) when asked by her friend Erica if she has another "sexier" Halloween costume for a party she is invited to, she responds with "Oh for sure! I have an Eric Andre wig…" before she is cut off by Erica with "Absolutely not." For context, Erica Andre is a well-known Black male comedian. However, Eric Andre hosts a show that probes guests with an absurd line of questioning and physical pranks. He wears his hair in a natural afro, mismatched clothes, and is a self-identified nerd. He has nothing to do with the sexiness that Erica, a Black woman is presenting in what is considered hegemonic blackness, is speaking of. Yet Janine does not know that. Her first response to the call for a sexier outfit is someone who also does not fit hegemonic Blackness. It takes a cue from another Black character for her to realize she is not performing as she should to be considered "down" or sexy. Janine's interpersonal level reveals

that she is missing the mark, her intercultural level reveals that her definition of sexy does not match what is generally expected, and finally her intrapsychic shows that she is in fact embarrassed, for missing the mark. The situation is not made awkward just because of her lack of sexual naivety it's made awkward by her failure to meet what is expected of her.

However, there are times when shame and embarrassment moves her towards another reaction. Other times, Janine will choose to perform the Awkward Black Girl through scripts in order to capture the eye of the heterosexual Black male gaze. The Awkward Black Girl is known for her sexual naivety (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). Slightly before her encounter with Erica, we see Janine longingly looking at Gregory, her coworker speaking with one of her student's parents. The mother of her student, Amber, is a Black woman with bamboo earrings, and a pink, sleek, and sexy dress. Her hair is long and straightened with slight curls at the end, with a half up half down ponytail. Through their interaction, Janine can see from far away she has captured the attention of Gregory. The series is constantly revealing the intimate and private thoughts of the characters. With this, the audience is able to see romantic tension between Gregory and Janine throughout their day-to-day lives. It is no secret the two share a secret affection for each other (Einhorn, 2021). In this episode, all the teachers dressed up in Halloween costumes. All of the Black women in the episode wear feminine costumes, ranging from Storm (the first Black female superhero), a bumble bee, and a "bad b****" (Season 2, Episode 6). Janine decides to show up as James Harden, an American professional basketball player for the Philadelphia 76ers of the NBA (NBA). Her costume is a blue basketball uniform and short-length cornrows, with a beard. Janine is failing to present the same Black femininity she sees around her – and in this moment, where she is peering at Gregory and Amber's interaction, she is seen downcast and disappointed. By now, we can assume whenever Janine looks disappointed, embarrassed or downcast, we see

the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts come to life to reveal the Awkward Black Girl. In this scene, think of Janine's embarrassment to be the cue for the Backstage Janine to take her place. Her sadness that she is not performing the way in which Black femininity is considered most desirable by the male gaze she wishes to capture. The intrapsychic reveals Janine's innermost feelings: I am not capturing the attention of my crush, I failed to present in a way that appeals to Gregory. The cultural and interpersonal scripts are revealed through her submission to assimilation and the approval of the Black characters around her.

Towards the end of the episode, Ava is seen waiting for Janine to come out in her new costume as Gregory arrives to the scene. Abruptly, Janine struts out confidently in her new costume: a long, silky, and pink Marilyn Monroe dress with sparkly diamond jewelry. Her hair is now in a straightened hairstyle with light curls at the end, just like Amber's. As she struts out Ava's approval is displayed verbally, and she seems to have captured Gregory's gaze as his eyes widen, he stutters, and tells her that "it looks great". It's important to note that Janine's confidence during this transition to hegemonic Black femininity within the series is not common. The Awkward Black Girl is not so prevalent after this transition due to her success of meeting the quota for what is expected of her. So, Janine does confirm, but it is on her own terms.

Body Language

Part of Janine's awkwardness comes from how she moves her body, or how she is *not* able to move her body. In the Black community, to be down, you are expected to know how to dance (Coleman, 2018). Janine fails in her attempts to do this, and this is pointed out by her Black colleagues. For example, in one episode, Janine and Ava bump heads on how they would like to run the Step Team (Season 1, Episode 8). After Ava sees the routine that Janine created for the girls, Ava stops the girls from completing their practice run "Cut, cut, that's enough of

that!". Janine, puzzled and confused quickly signals to the camera with her eyes her feelings of confusion, and asks the girls to take a five-minute break while she and Ava discuss. When Janine asks Ava, "What's the problem?" Ava fires back with all the things wrong with Janine's ideal of a Step routine. "This royalty-free music is wack, and these dance movies are tired." After a pushback from Janine, Ava ends with "How'd you manage to make Step dorky?" Stepping, or percussive dance has its origins in the Black community and continues to be one of the most popular dances among the Black community. It has been highlighted in popular Black films such as *Stomp the Yard*, *School Daze,* and *Drumline* (Hilbring, 2020). The comedic tone of the scene lightens Ava's question – but what's under the surface is "how did you manage to be out of step by not knowing how to step? How did you manage to *mess up* this essential part of Blackness? How did you manage to miss what you should already know?" Along with language, step can be considered an aspect of Black culture that brings solidarity. Not knowing how to dance is widely known as a reason to have your "Black card revoked" (Coleman, 2018). A person's "Black card" is not an actual physical card, it is an idea. Having a Black card means that you are in fact Black, and usually this is determined by a person's knowledge and practice of aspects of Black culture but also an investment with popular Black media texts (Carter, 2020).

Furthermore, this signals that Ava's performance of Blackness is the default, the norm, and correct, whereas Janine's performed Blackness is out of the norm. Janine explains to a now-dancing Ava that Step is "supposed to be about structure and responsibility, not Cardi B lyrics." Ava, now speaking with an authoritative tone, corrects her with "Step is supposed to be fun and about expressing yourself. You use that to create a routine." Janine, still not backing down from her ideas, is overruled when Ava asks the Step team "who wants to start a new routine?" All of the girls who were dancing around Ava stop and raise their hand, sending a strong message that

Ava's idea of a good Step routine is what fits. Janine is then moved back from the group's circle and is left standing on the outside, alone. With a somber face, she attempts to mimic the dancing of the Black females around her. However, she does so without ease. Janine's failure to perform Step adhering to Avas and the rest of the girls' standards place her on the outside. By not performing Step the way it is deemed essential to the rest, Ava and the team do not feel the same sense of community that they feel with each other. Hence, this is why she is on the outside, alone, while they create a circle of community. She does not belong. The step team's engagement with Janine and Ava's ideals are telling of how exactly Janine is failing to perform normative Blackness. Avas's immediate acceptance and relatability to the team of Black girls translates to "this is the way". Janine's structured and fundamental approach to teaching Step is not met with enthusiasm, and she does not relate to the group of Black girls under her teaching. Her version of Step does not lead to solidarity, community, and relatability.

Routinely, the Awkward Black Girl has failed to perform hegemonic Blackness, so she retreats to performing what is being modeled to her. However, through Janine's somber face and uncoordinated body movements, the intrapsychic, cultural, and interpersonal scripts all work together to reveal the Awkward Black Girl. Through Janine's cultural and interpersonal script, we are able to see her conform or assimilate into what is considered a good step routine, however, through her intrapsychic script we are able to see her true feelings about this assimilation. She fails to do so with ease because there is a transition between Janine's own version of authentic Blackness and hegemonic Blackness. It is simply difficult for Janine to be anything but *herself.*

Janine does not reject her Blackness, for her it is not a version at all, it is simply a way of being. In fact, in "Teacher's Conference", Janine briefly reveals her background (Season 2,

Episode 16). When Jacob suggests they go to a seminar titled “White Teacher, Black School”, she quickly looks at the camera with wide eyes and rejects Jacob’s suggestion, saying “Uh, yeah, I’m good on that. I already did four years of Black Student, White School. I went to Penn, so”. This statement is brief, and understandably easily overlooked. However, for me, it is one of the most powerful statements Janine has made throughout the entirety of the series. It reveals Janine’s underlying positionality as the Awkward Black Girl. She has an understanding and knowledge of her position in the world as a Black woman, however, she still is who she is. The terms I use in this chapter such as hegemonic and authentic do not exist for Janine, because there was never a question of which category her Blackness fits. It is easy to believe Janine makes situations awkward, however, I believe it is rather the people around her make situations awkward because they do not fit their standard of what it means to be down, cool, or Black. It is worthwhile considering that the title of Awkward Black Girl is not for Janine, it is what others around her mark her as. Certainly, the lack of awareness is funny – although some may call her lack of awareness self-absorbed and narcissistic - the lack of awareness is a performative and resistive statement in itself.

Conclusion

The word Awkward means not by ease, whether that be performance-wise or socially. Janine’s performance of the Awkward Black girl displays her inability to perform hegemonic media representations of Black femininity. However, though this is not done with ease, it is done without a lack of grace – we are able to see Janine’s lack of self-awareness, self-absorbedness, inability to move in rhythm, and sexual nativity as what they are: flaws. The versions of hegemonic Black femininity seen in *Abbott Elementary* are not necessarily problematic, wrong, or inaccurate. These aspects of hegemonic Blackness are not wrong, however it is a series of

representations of Black womanhood, when beyond the screen there are millions of ways to think about Black womanhood. Awkwardness is a way for Janine to switch from performing her authentic flawed, self to performing the expected version of Blackness for her.

In this chapter, I analyzed scenes from the hit ABC series *Abbott Elementary*. I introduced the tethering of authentic Black femininity and the Awkward Black Girl – and discussed how Janine Teagues performs the Awkward Black Girl through a set of cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts. Janine's awkwardness is a huge part of the series' comedic break, along with other characters. However, the intersectionality of being Awkward, Black, and a Girl creates not just a comedic performance but a script that points towards the possibility of new ways of representing Black women. All of these performances reveal the awkwardness from the script comes from Janine's failure to fit hegemonic Blackness within the series. Through speech, she stumbles, redirects, and hesitates. She fails to speak Black language with the correct pronunciation. Her choice of style and clothes make her stand out, or fit in when she needs to. Her body language posits her as an other on the outside of the group. The Awkward Black Girl is not a monolith script – it can function in many different ways. My positionality. as the reader allowed me to see the Awkward Black Girl as a script for representing Black women when they do not fit what is typically represented of then. How they do not fit will depend upon the reader of any given text where there is an Awkward Black Girl.

I think about my youth. I think about the media representations I saw, and what was expected of me. I believe resistive performances such as Quinta Brunson's would have empowered me even more to stand still in my own version of what it meant to be Black. I cannot say that other Awkward Black Girls would have not faced the consequences of being an Other. However, I can say on the individual level, it would have provided a sense of console and

assurance that Awkward Black Girls find their way eventually. They are awkward, they are clumsy, they don't fit in, and they still find people who love them exactly the way they are. There are more Awkward Black Girls emerging on screen, if you just look closely. I call on other Black feminist media scholars to refocus their gaze and look for resistive performances such as the one given in this series. I challenge other Black feminist media scholars to continue to reconstruct and redefine the way we think about the Awkward Black Girl. What does the Awkward Black Girl mean to you? What does the Awkward Black Girl *do* for you?

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

The Awkward Black Girl is an emerging script within television that offers a new representation of Black womanhood. Though the ABG has existed since the 90s, Issa Rae's performance has become the dominant prototype of the ABG due to her national success, agency and production of the character she creates. Though the ABC show *Abbott Elementary* is fairly new, Quinta Brunson has been performing the Awkward Black Girl script since 2017. To add to the subfield of critical cultural studies I asked these three questions: *How is the Awkward Black Girl a new media script of Black womanhood? How is the Awkward Black Girl represented in media? How do I experience the Awkward Black Girl in everyday life?* To answer these questions, I employed a combination of critical social theory and critical qualitative methods in the two chapters throughout this thesis.

As stated earlier, Blackness is *not* a monolith. These performances of Blackness or "reps" to the culture can provide a sense of community. Black art is not just staged entertainment, it is empowerment. Black art is a way for Black people to resist, reclaim, and challenge oppressive ideologies, and just a way for us to tell our stories. We see this even within academia, where scholars such as Aisha Durham and Robin Boylorn use poems, performances, photographs, and stories, such as in Robin Boylorn's *Sweetwater* where she narrates her rural girlhood to take up the space in academia where Black women's voices are rarely heard, or Asia Durham's *Home with Hip Hop Feminism* where she uses poems, performance, and autoethnography to speak to everyday experiences in her life – seen through the lens of hip hop feminism (2017; 2015). These

same scholars have paid homage to and referenced popular Black media texts whether that is reality television such as *Love and Hip Hop*, or iconic Black female performers such as Queen Latifah, and Beyonce. These scholars also asked, how did this impact me? How did this popular part of the culture represent Black womanhood?

So, I acknowledge the culture right now by also asking how does Black popular culture impact me? How does black popular culture represent Black womanhood? This entire body of work is a homage to the culture that Black people have created. The R&B, Hip Hop, and Black film texts that I have cited is a homage to the culture. We *are* the culture. So, if Blackness simply means paying homage to the culture, and being knowledgeable about Black popular culture, and speaking a certain way, or having swag, knowing how to dance, then I have done that. So, while I understand the pressure to "represent", I do not accept the ideology that Blackness *only* represents the culture that we made. I understand the importance and political impact Black art has been in history as well as a way for our community to resist, reclaim, and challenge oppressive ideologies. Despite this, I still believe that the same way in which Whiteness is "slippery" is the same way in which Blackness should be allowed to be "slippery" (McRae & Warren, 2012, p. 61). Racial performance is under the guise of the privilege that Whiteness moves within. Our identity has been defined and put into a box of what it should be based on what is enforced and commodified by a media heavily dominated by Whiteness. We are defined as the Other because of Whiteness's ability to be slippery and unmarked. To be Black is to have roots – and since we are a people that have been plucked from our home and forced to create a new culture all over the world, one simply cannot say there is one way to be Black. This would be an oversimplification of Blackness. Blackness is not just a means of expression it is an identity. I have brown skin, curly hair, and brown eyes. I speak in AAVE, but I also speak

Mainstream English Language, and sometimes I combine the two. I understand the struggle of Black Americans, I have experiences microaggressions and racism in this country, and when I meet with the elders in my family line, I can hear the stories of a people who were not afforded the same rights as everyone else buy their own land in order to ensure their own safety not just for them, but for the generations who come after them.

There is another Black girl out there who has completely different physical features, comes from a different class, experiences the world differently, and maybe instead of her roots coming from Georgia they come from New York. In this logic, Blackness *cannot* be a monolith. Those who place Blackness under a certain way of speaking, dressing, acting, or being are unintentionally or intentionally reducing Blackness down to racial performance. So, while I understand the historical implications for why Blackness has been enforced even by those of us in the Black community, I also encourage us to think beyond what has been oversimplified. Solidarity and empowerment are a must, however, this can be done while also accepting fluidity in how we express our own authentic Blackness – whatever that may be.

With this thesis, I contribute to the field of Communication and the subfields of Black Feminist Thought, media, and critical cultural studies. I have taken something within culture, questioned it, added critique, and resisted representation of Black women on screen. Critical autoethnography allowed me to reflect on my own experiences as an Awkward Black Girl, taking into consideration how class, gender, and racial performance informed my social construction of reality. In previous chapters, I noted that there are multiple bodies of work within Communication scholarship that critique and resist the representation of Black women. However, as we step into the future, I search for representations that work to defy stereotypical representations. I encourage other Black feminist scholars within Communication to continue

marking these distinguishing tropes and scripts as a way to resist representations that do little to diversify ways of seeing Black women on screen. It's important to explore progressions in representation to build hope for Black female spectators but also outside of academia.

The Awkward Black Girl's performance on screen has changed from its very early depictions in 90's sitcoms. With Issa Rae's *Insecure*, the HBO hit show brought attention to the Awkward Black Girl again but also brought in new representations that featured darker skinned Black women, when Awkward Black Girls of the 90's and early 2000's were mostly light skinned Black women (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). While Moffitt & Henderson identified the Awkward Black Girl's distinguishing features and themes that make the Awkward Black Girl a trope, I was able to identify the qualities that make the Awkward Black Girl a script due to its performative nature. Blackness is not a monolith, so the Awkward Black Girl is not either. Its performative aspect creates space for new ways of depicting Black women and their stories. With this project, I tied the Awkward Black Girl script to its close relation to the Black Nerd and the archetypes associated with that performance. The same nerdy attributes we see in iconic Black television characters such as Steve Urkel (*Family Matters 1989 - 1998*), Carlton Banks (*Fresh Prince of Bel-Air 1990- 1996*), T. J. Henderson (*Smart Guy 1997 - 1999*), Lucas Sinclair (*Stranger Things 2016 -)* and James Spurlock (*30 Rock 2006 - 2013*), are the same nerdy attributes we see in Issa Dee (*Insecure*) and Janine Teagues. The distinction of Awkward Black Girl script is in the performative aspect but also its resistance to Black women tropes of the past that are akin to controlling images. The intersections of being Awkward, Black, and Girl are at hand. There are other ways in which the Awkward Black Girl causes disruption and that can vary. In *Abbott Elementary*, Janine's performance of the Awkward Black Girl merged together archetypes of the Black Nerd with cultural scripts of the Awkward Black Girl to create a resistive

representation of a stereotypical representation of Black womanhood but also because of her racial otherness. My positionality as a Christian, middle-class, straight Black woman has allowed me to read the text as I have. What about other scholars within Communication whose positionality differ from mine?

Awkwardness can be used in many ways to produce new representations of Blackness in the media. Awkwardness causes disruption – and it can disrupt how we have typically seen Blackness on screen. Awkwardness is being used by Black film creators to tell their unique stories in ways we have not seen before. I'm curious to see other media texts that use awkwardness. Also, how is awkwardness used by Black men in Hollywood to disrupt representations of Black masculinity and their coming of age?

The most critical limiting factor in this study is that this only applies to me. I am not the only Awkward Black Girl in the world, neither is Issa Rae or Quinata Brunson. There are other Black girls out there that could relate to me. It would benefit scholars to consider how those who identify as an Other within an Other or a racial outsider navigate daily life experiences and conceptualize their Blackness. How do they come to grips with their own racial identity? What as their girlhood like? *Methodically,* projects could consider how others who identify with me view the media they consume and how it has affected them through critical ethnography methods. Future projects could also use collaborative autoethnography to research how Black women find belonging in spaces where they feel they are a racial outsider. To expand this type of research in other areas of Communication, researchers could also use interpersonal frameworks to understand how performative face theory or communication theory of identity interacts with those who are Black nerds, or who consider themselves Awkward Black Girls. Qualitative data-

based methods such as narrative analysis and thematic analysis could be used to understand the lived experiences of those who may feel they have to racially perform even as an Other.

In the first chapter, I introduced my research questions and my thesis statement. I presented a review of literature that discussed the representation of Black women in the media, themes identified for the Awkward Black Girl, and contributions to the field of Black feminist media studies. I conclude the chapter by expressing my contribution to the field.

In the second chapter, I used critical Black feminist autoethnography to examine the lived experiences of an Awkward Black Girl. My critical eyes looking for entertainment turned me to look for a fresh, new, emerging representation. However, behind the text reader there are real-life memories and experiences that help me to inform my analysis in the next chapter. Through memories of girlhood to present I was able to critically examine how class, power, and the media informed my daily performances of the Awkward Black Girl in my own life.

In the third chapter, I introduced The Awkward Black Girl as a new race-gender script within Primetime television due to it's performative aspect. Through a set of cultural levels, Janine performs the Awkward Black Girl script through her speech, dress, and body language. Derived from the Black Nerd trope, the Awkward Black Girl script departs from other dominant television tropes of Black women. Janine's awkwardness creates a disruption that allows room for new imaginations of Black womanhood. Awkwardness allows her to be her most authentic self - even if that includes experiencing racial outsiderness.

With this thesis, I hope to spark more conversations around the importance of the Awkward Black Girl. I also hope to expand upon critical cultural studies work in the future by studying the different ways in which Black women are represented in contemporary media

platforms, not just in television but on social media, film, and the music industry. Such scholarship works to resist oppressive images of Black women and could contribute to creating new and complex representations of Black women.

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