

THESIS

BLACK LIKE IT NEVER LEFT: BLACK WOMEN AND REPRESENTATION IN
CONTEMPORARY BROADCAST TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

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It is imperative that we recognize that broadcast television is not dead, despite echoing declarations to the contrary, and that it can be a viable platform for presenting Black-led programs telling complex stories. In this project, I argue that current broadcast television shows are harnessing their industrial position and staple generic conventions to reorient depictions of Blackness on broadcast to more complexly and resonantly reflect lived Black experiences. It seems that these stories are being told not just on niche or fringe platforms catering to Black audiences, but also on long established and popular broadcast channels. This project is a limited survey of Black female representation on broadcast television comprised of three case studies: Fox's emergency procedural *9-1-1*, The CW's HBCU set drama *All American: Homecoming*, and ABC's sitcom *Abbott Elementary*. Guiding this survey is a set of critical questions: First, how do these cases represent Black womanhood? Second, what are the industrial and creative contexts of these cases and how do they influence the texts? How do their creators, showrunners, writers, and actors work within the broadcast parameters and appropriate traditional conventions to display different iterations of Blackness? Finally, what new cultural meanings, if any, are the resulting representations generating?

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2022, long-trusted audience measurement firm Nielsen reported that, for the first time ever, “streaming claimed the largest share of U.S. Television viewing” in the month prior, with a weekly average of 190.9 billion minutes streamed on televisions alone (excluding phones, laptops, etc.). That consumption made up 34.8% of all television viewing, cable accounted for 34.4%, and broadcast for 21.6%.¹ Streaming numbers had surpassed broadcast viewership before, but this time, it overtook cable as well.² While it had long been proclaimed that traditional TV has begun its march toward irrelevance, this data supported that sentiment in a way it had not been corroborated before.

Unsurprisingly, according to Nielsen’s “State of Play” report released in April 2022, white consumers are the viewing majority across platforms, streamers (Netflix, HBO Max, Hulu, Disney+, etc.) and traditional television (broadcast networks and cable channels) alike. What *is* surprising, perhaps, is the difference in size of that majority between the streaming and broadcast platforms. White viewers make up just over 75% of streaming and almost 60% of broadcast audiences. Meanwhile, Black consumers constitute almost 18% of streaming and 21% of broadcast audiences.³ The U.S. Census Bureau reports nearly 62% of Americans are white and a little over 14% of Americans identify as Black.⁴ So, proportionally speaking, Black Americans are out viewing white ones when it comes to broadcast.

Why do these numbers matter? Well, first and foremost, they underscore streaming’s increasing adoption by American consumers. However, they also demonstrate that broadcast television is not yet irrelevant. In fact, those numbers indicate that broadcast television is relevant *and* its viewership is substantially non-white relative to streamers, with Black and

Hispanic/Latinx Americans occupying 43% of the viewership collectively. It is imperative to note that, while viewers of color put up substantial numbers on broadcast, their presence in streaming userships is smaller. As mentioned above, Black viewers make up 57.2% less of the audience for streamers than white viewers.⁵

This is consequential for a number of reasons, the first of which is that much critically acclaimed and celebrated representation of Black experiences exists on pay-to-watch platforms. Issa Rae's hit comedy-drama *Insecure*, for example, follows a group of Black 20-somethings as they navigate work, friendship, love, and life. The show, viewable on HBO's cable channel and streamer HBO Max, garnered quite a few accolades over its run, including several Golden Globe and Emmy nominations, a few of which led to wins. Not only was it received well critically, but popular discourses also lauded the show's culturally resonant presentation of complex and diverse Black experiences that didn't center around perpetual, undifferentiated struggle.

Undoubtedly, Issa Rae and HBO's *Insecure* is among the most influential shows of the past decade or so, but its home on a prestige subscription service makes it inaccessible for some viewers to which it might otherwise speak. Those who regularly engage with the show and other HBO content have looked for it and decided that they are willing and able to pay for it. Broadcast networks, by design, do not have to be sought out, nor do they require monetary payment for access. Anyone with a TV can watch the programs they present. Although streaming services are ubiquitous and increasingly popular, there are still plenty of media consumers who do not have the desire or disposable income to use them. Given the social, economic, and political structural inequalities American minorities face, it is safe to infer that disposable income is scarce or non-existent for many. Often, the celebrated and critically acclaimed representation work minority-led programs do on these "quality television" services are largely unavailable to

the very kinds of people they represent. What I am interested in is how free, over-the-airwave broadcast networks are presenting Black-led programs with complex stories.

One name that cannot go unmentioned in discussing 21st century broadcast television is that of primetime drama auteur, former ABC darling, and overseer of the “Thank God It’s Thursday” evening lineup, Shonda Rhimes. Beginning with her much lauded efforts on *Grey’s Anatomy* (*Grey’s*), with *Scandal*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, and *Grey’s* spin-off *Station 19*, and others following, Rhimes and ABC established a must-see-TV model that rocked the industry. In addition to her distinct narrative style, Rhimes built a culturally appointed reputation as “television’s diversity queen” for broaching contentious social issues and doing so with visibly diverse casts.⁶ Television royalty indeed, few conversations about primetime left out the de facto Baronness of Broadcast, Princess of Primetime, Duchess of Network Drama, Shonda Rhimes. Not only did Rhimes’ shows consistently dominate ratings; they also frequently topped Twitter’s trending topics on the nights that they aired. At the same time that her shows accumulated immense popular success, many cultural critics took her to task for her shallow treatment of race on *Grey’s* and *Scandal*, a topic assessed in this project’s literature review. Nevertheless, Rhimes’ influential tenure on ABC changed the landscape of primetime broadcast television.

Interestingly, even the broadcast monarch herself got swept up in the expansion of streaming popularity. In 2017, she split from ABC and her production company, Shondaland, signed a \$100 million development deal with Netflix.⁷ Rhimes and company’s pivot to streaming and Netflix’s apparent willingness to spend big in order to attract viewers indicated a major shift in the streaming vs. traditional TV saga.

Five years, a plethora of new streaming platforms, and two seasons of *Bridgerton* later, it appears that the television industry and its relationship to Black women have become even more complicated. Several other Black women creators' content, lauded for its authenticity, exists exclusively on "quality TV" pay platforms. As mentioned previously, Issa Rae's *Insecure* and now *Rap Sh!t* are on HBO and HBO Max. Lena Waithe's urban Black drama *The Chi* is on Showtime and its streaming platform. These shows and the narratives they present are worth appreciating, but "quality" Blackness, depictions of Black experiences worth our attention, do not only exist behind pay walls.

It is imperative that we recognize that broadcast is not dead, despite echoing declarations to the contrary in various trade publications and pockets of the internet. 21.6% is less than 34.8% of the overall viewing share, yes, but it is far from a trivial amount or none. People are still watching broadcast television. The demographic makeup of those people is consequential for how we think about media representation. I will not argue that the racism and systemic inequality at the root of the governing principle of commercial television has changed. It has not. However, the audiences that networks seek to attract as leverage for securing advertisers has; they are Blacker and Browner than they used to be. Collectively, these Blacker and Browner audiences and the broader society of which they are apart are on the heels of a tumultuous several years that saw a resurgence in white nationalism under the Trump presidency, jarring and near-incessant documented cases of race-based police brutality, and a pandemic that disproportionately affected the lives and livelihoods of people of color.

In this project, I argue that current broadcast television shows are harnessing their industrial position and staple generic conventions to reorient depictions of Blackness on broadcast to more complexly and resonantly reflect lived Black experiences. After decades of

exclusion, mis- and underrepresentation, and invisibility, we are finally seeing more varied and complex stories about Black people told by Black people on television. Importantly, it seems that these stories are being told not just on niche or fringe platforms catering to Black audiences, but also on long established and popular broadcast channels. This project is a limited survey of Black female representation on broadcast television. It takes as its objects of study three primetime programs across three networks and genres: Fox's emergency procedural *9-1-1*, The CW's HBCU set drama *All American: Homecoming*, and ABC's sitcom *Abbott Elementary*. Guiding this survey is a set of critical questions: First, how do these cases represent Black womanhood? Second, what are the industrial and creative contexts of these cases and how do they influence the texts? How do their creators, showrunners, writers, and actors work within the broadcast parameters and appropriate traditional conventions to display different iterations of Blackness? Finally, what new cultural meanings, if any, are the resulting representations generating? In exploring these questions, I aim to contribute insights about the current state of Black female representation in popular media to previous and existing scholarship on the subject. The foundation of my efforts is the assertion that broadcast representations of Black womanhood do important cultural work, that we do not have to exclusively look to pay services to find Black female creators and characters worth celebrating.

In this prospectus, I will establish the theoretical foundation on which my project is built. Next, I will overview my critical method and thesis chapters.

Literature Review

Black Feminist Thought: Self-definition as Resistance

The habitual misrepresentation, under-representation, and absence of Black women on television can be primarily attributed to their historic exclusion from creative and produciorial

industrial processes. That is to say, for the vast majority of television history, white men almost exclusively controlled all aspects of the industry, preventing Black women from writing their own stories or bringing their experiences to characters they were sometimes cast to play. In this environment, Black women on television were defined and illustrated by the same white hegemonic societal forces responsible for oppressing, essentializing, and abusing them. They lacked the ability to define themselves.

The theoretical framework of this project is rooted in identity and representation focused work. Although this study is not necessarily feminism-centered, it is Black woman-centric. Thus, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) offers crucial insights that guide its development. In her foundational text *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins identifies three interlocking dimensions of Black American women's oppression. The first is economic, the exploitation of their labor. The second is political, constituted by routine deprivation of rights and disenfranchisement. Finally, the ideological dimension is the one most central to this project. Collins writes, "[i]deology represents the process by which certain assumed qualities are attached to Black women and how those qualities are used to justify oppression."⁸ Among other primary facilitators of that process is broadcast media as a "social institution of knowledge validation" from which Black women have long been excluded.⁹

Collins defines BFT as "theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" and identifies five core themes within the paradigm: legacy of struggle, what is essentially intersectionality (the term had not been coined yet), self-definition, standpoint specific activism, and sexual politics.¹⁰ Collins positions these themes as a unifying thread across otherwise varied experiences of Black womanhood. Recognizing them as such establishes a base for investigating televisual representation as part of the ideological dimension of Black women's

oppression, but this project takes up self-definition as a particularly key theme in assessing the texts at hand, as they all have Black women among their executive production ranks. Collins invokes Audre Lorde to emphasize the centrality of self-definition to Black women's collective wellbeing: "it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment."¹¹ For so long, mediated representations were and did exactly that; they were made by white men looking to make Black women palpable for the "universal" (read white) audience. Today, the industrial climate has changed to accommodate more and diverse types of Black femininity and is more hospitable to Black women creators. The extent to which they are empowered to make the most of these opportunities in terms of presenting the stories they know best is both essential to the texts they produce and bound to the television industry at large.

Self-definition is a resistant act. Collins calls upon bell hooks's assertion that "[o]ppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story" to emphasize that fact.¹² In this way Black creators', producers', and actors' presence and work to represent their experiences and those of other Black people on broadcast networks has the capacity to challenge the oppressive forces that limit Black agency. Whether and why they do or do not effectively exploit those possibilities to their full extent is a key question driving this investigation. Are networks genuinely inviting and enabling Black women to define their realities and tell their stories to changing audiences? If so, how?

Politics of Representation: Contextual "Ebb and Flow"

Across television history, the self-definition prescribed as essential for resisting domination has been alternately un/available to Black people in the industry. Black women,

especially, have rarely seen opportunities to assert their subjectivities on platforms like film and television. As feminist media scholar Jacqueline Bobo offers in her introduction to *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, the denial of access to these platforms precludes the recognition of Black women as “cultural producers, critics and scholars, and cultural consumers.”¹³ That recognition and acts of self-definition are dimensions of Black feminist activism, “[challenges] to cultural domination,” that have the power to tangibly affect the material conditions of Black women’s lives.¹⁴

Writing around the turn of the new millennium, media scholar Beretta E. Smith-Shomade highlights that, aside from Bobo’s work, scholarship on Black media representation has “[forwarded] largely celebratory, historical, and male-centered assertions,”¹⁵ offering limited space for Black women. I preemptively recognize that the theoretical framework laid out in this introduction relies heavily on the work of a male scholar whose work has largely focused on male-centered texts, cultural scholar Herman Gray. However, in *Shaded Lives: African-American Women and Television*, Smith-Shomade models a way that I might bridge Gray’s scholarship and my own. She acknowledges that *Watching Race* engages “contemporary discourses of race and gender while addressing some critical intersections and problems within definitions of Blackness,” but also that it does so “at the expense of an in-depth study on what that means to Black Women.”¹⁶ *Shaded Lives* contributes to conversations about Black media representation by providing critical interrogations of the historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts from which images of Black women, specifically, emerge. This thesis seeks to enter that scholarly conversation.

Writing more recently, media scholar Imani M. Cheers notes that discussions of Black women’s televisual representation have primarily “focused on enduring stereotypes rooted in

racism and sexism,” to which both Collins and Bobo allude.¹⁷ Cheers’ book *The Evolution of Black Women in Television: Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses* updates conceptions of these stereotypes and examines the ways in which Black women have been empowered to take “control of their image and voice.”¹⁸ Like this project, the text cites Herman Gray and “aims to bring contemporary insight to [his] work.”¹⁹ The goal of this thesis is to use the discursive frames outlined below to analyze not only contemporary texts featuring Black women both in front of and behind the camera, but also the industrial contexts from which they emerge.

Gray offers insightful commentary on the political and industrial forces that facilitate or hinder opportunities for Black self-definition on television. In Part II of *Cultural Moves*, Gray’s subject of intrigue is the “ebb and flow of black television representations from season to season;” he explores “the context, history, and cultural implications of this pattern.”²⁰ He begins the chapter by analyzing the 1998 television season “as a basis for considering some of the more general questions raised by the episodic nature of this institutional production of visibility and invisibility.”²¹ Eventually, he ties this cycle to periodic struggles with the tension between neo-liberal ideals of equality and our actual reality:

...the discourses of politics and media activism that periodically appeal to network television for greater visibility and recognition are organized by a view of television as a key for fashioning a national imaginary through cultural pluralism . . . [The] complex and related discourses of liberal pluralism emanating from journalism, politics, and the academy have failed to grasp adequately the gap between their discursive commitment and the contemporary realities of this transformation.²²

In other words, there is a periodic struggle between television's ideological use as a tool for fortifying the neo-liberal ideal of equality, the capitalist economic environment in which it exists, and the social imperatives it must fulfill in order to achieve those economic goals. “Diverse” programming and the presence or lack of it is “a conflict between the political economic interests and representational responsibility.”²³

In *Watching Race*, published a decade before *Cultural Moves*, Gray maps three televisual discursive categories onto a rough timeline of Black presence on network television beginning in the mid-1960s.²⁴ In both texts, Gray uses the Civil Rights Movement as a point of reference for the beginning of the cyclical turbulence:

The discourse of integration was deeply rooted in the logic of assimilation, which, in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, was codified into a social project of color blindness, a legal project of equal opportunity, and a moral project of individualism and self-responsibility.²⁵

In terms of commercial television, after the Civil Rights Movement, “networks still had to avoid alienating whites” while also considering the newly recognized “full political, legal, cultural” minority subjects of the nation.²⁶ The industry adopted “the discourse of liberal pluralism as a strategy of management and containment to do both—that is, to make blacks visible and to hold the racial center by not alienating whites.”²⁷ Assimilationist discourses “treat the social and political issues of black presence in particular and racism in general as individual problems,” trivializing social and cultural difference for the sake of (a mythical) universality.²⁸ Invisibility and colorblindness reinforce hegemonic whiteness and erase the fraught history of Black Americans. Gray points to *Julia* as an exemplar of integrating “individual black characters into hegemonic white worlds void of any hint of African American traditions, social struggle, racial

conflicts, and cultural difference.”²⁹ *Julia* followed a widowed nurse of the same name (Diahann Carroll) who worked in a white doctor’s office at an aerospace firm. It chronicled her navigation of motherhood, work and co-workers, and social life while largely ignoring her socioeconomic position as a Black woman working for a white man amongst nearly exclusively white counterparts.³⁰ This trend continued into the 1980’s, with shows like *Designing Women* sometimes addressing race but doing so in ways that “were underwritten and framed by assumptions that privilege individual cooperation and color blindness,” thus making Black characters’ acceptance contingent upon their distance from cultural Blackness.³¹

In response to the assimilationism that dominated Black television texts following the Civil Rights Movement, the late 1980s through early 1990s saw a turn to what Gray identifies as “separate-but-equal” or pluralist discourses that “situate black characters in domestically centered black worlds and circumstances that essentially parallel those of whites.”³² Pluralist discourses positioned Black and white people as “just alike save for minor differences of habit and perspective developed from African American experiences in a homogeneous and monolithic black world.”³³ Divorced from social or historical contexts, pluralist shows make it possible to celebrate minorities “without disrupting and challenging the dominant narratives about American society.”³⁴ Moreover, Gray argues that these shows essentialize the Black experience in a way that removes nuance and diversity across lived Black experiences. He points to *Family Matters*, *227*, and *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* as exemplars of this discourse.

227, for example, followed an all-Black group of neighbors living in a middle-class DC apartment building and cast Marla Gibbs in the starring role. Despite the Blackness of its cast and the presence of Black writers on staff, ultimate creative control of the show remained in the hands of white producers. Interviewing Black writers from the show, Gray learned that “the nuances and

sensibilities of African American culture many of them found funny and attempted to [include] became points of professional contention or were eliminated because white head writers and producers thought otherwise.”³⁵ This show and other pluralist texts, then, were “shows about Blacks” rather than Black shows, Gray insists. The Blackness of the casts belied still-intransigent “boundaries concerning cultural representations, social themes, and professional conventions,”³⁶ illustrating the “separate but equal logic” Gray outlines at work. They do briefly cross racial boundaries, but do so in a way that reinforces hegemonic understandings of Blackness—that is, in relation to or in conflict with dominant standards of middle class success and respectability. They talk about Black issues, but primarily through a capitalist class frame that the white mainstream can understand, despite the vernacular and lived experiences of the Black audience it is “meant for.”

The final discourse Gray discusses in *Watching Race*, multiculturalism, is one that he advances as the most conducive to meaningful representations of Black people on television. He asserts that multicultural programs invite viewers to “encounter complex, even contradictory, perspectives and representations of black life in America” by “interrogating and engaging African American cultural traditions, perspectives, and experiences.”³⁷ In this discursive paradigm, Black people are allowed and encouraged to speak to the experiences that they know, even/especially if they push against normative whiteness and a hegemonic view of Blackness. Gray highlights *A Different World* and *In Living Color* as shows that “engage cultural politics of difference within the sign of blackness,” in which “black life and culture are constantly made, remade, modified, and extended,” thereby underscoring the diversity and dynamism of these experiences.³⁸

Gray's mention of *In Living Color* offers an opportunity to pull in the industrial timeline I find most relevant to the foundations of this project. The show aired on the then-nascent Fox network, founded by media mogul Rupert Murdoch in 1986. In its early years, Fox worked to secure traditionally under-pursued "urban" (read Black and Brown) audiences with cutting-edge programming, establishing a reputation as the "rebel" fourth network. So, they gave Keenan Ivory Wayans a spot to do with as he pleased, and the mostly-Black sketch show was born. Over the show's run, its sketches broached topics other networks were unwilling to touch; it poked at U.S. society, interrogated stereotypes, and leaned into experiences and stories deeply rooted in various Black American cultural experiences. Additionally, the show gave a broadcast platform to Black music artists whose performances were taped and aired alongside sketches. Fox went on to house an unprecedented number of Black-centered shows, including beloved sitcoms *Martin* and *Living Single*.³⁹ Fox's brazen pursuit of Black audiences coincided with the broader mainstreaming of Black culture in the 1990s. The decade saw rap, hip-hop style and culture, and previously derided elements of Blackness commodified and enthusiastically adopted by droves of white consumers.

In 1994, though, the eight-year-old network abruptly did an about-face and canceled nearly all of its Black-cast shows after acquiring the rights to the NFL's Sunday games. Leveraging the numbers it had built off Black viewership, once Fox had the big-time sports contract it needed to make big money, it forsook the very same audience that helped it get to that position in the first place. As *Color by Fox* author Kristal Brent Zook argues, the Black complexity that drove the network's popularity among minority viewers is what led those series to their demise in 1994. Fox assumed all the new, presumably white viewers gained from the NFL partnership and their consumer dollars had no interest in culturally specific, sometimes

uncomfortable Black stories and truths. Michael Curtin offers that Fox's behavior is typical of "neo-Fordist" strategies exhibited across culture industries as technological advancement and audience fragmentation surged in the late 20th century. Trying to find an equilibrium between pursuing "low involvement," "universal" content and products aimed at niche audiences, Fox used the nascent network as "testing and recruiting grounds for new cultural forms" targeted at minoritized populations, only to leverage that popularity to pursue a more profitable audience.⁴⁰

That assumption made by Fox seemed to govern general broadcast network sentiment on Black representation for over a decade. Shows focused on people of color were moved to the back burner. For instance, fledgling netlets—smaller networks designed to target more niche audience—The WB and UPN gave homes to Black hits like *Moesha* and *The Parkers*. However, the two would eventually merge to form the CW in 2005 and, similar to Fox a little over a decade before, clean house in regard to Black programming to make room for more lucrative, young, white audiences.

This market-driven shift away from minority centered programming on primetime broadcasts gave rise to the "Lily White" controversy of 1999. Watchdog groups including the NAACP threatened to boycott the Big Four broadcast networks if they did not diversify their lineups visually and creatively, as most minority-led programs had been relegated to "ghetto" networks (e.g., UPN and the WB) and/or "ghetto" time slots (notoriously undesirable parts of network programming schedules) or canceled altogether. To appease advocates, networks sought to include more people of color, visibly "ethnic" bodies, in the same kinds of content they were already making: "universally relatable" white-centered procedurals, dramas, and sitcoms. Additionally, the "increased pervasiveness and acceptance of multiculturalism" within the nation

buoyed these efforts initiated under duress, as advertisers sought to reach younger, hipper audiences.⁴¹

Here, it is important to note that the “multiculturalism” which Vincent Brook identifies is markedly different from the multiculturalism Gray advances as a discursive mechanism for presenting varied and genuine iterations of Blackness. This “multiculturalism” is, in fact, assimilationism in a bad wig, a barely altered manifestation of the problematic representational status quo. This manifestation can be read as the “minor” or “periodic correction” of adding nominally diverse cast members to otherwise white programs for the sake of “the national ideal of integration and liberal pluralism, most especially the social and cultural discourses through which such ideals were made representable.”⁴² Gray pulls a quote from a 1999 LA Times article that summarizes the governing principle of broadcast television programming at the turn of the century: “Networks can’t afford to alienate whites, who make up the vast majority of potential viewers, and remain the ones advertisers privately concede that they want most.”⁴³

So, in looking to find the midpoint between “accepting the responsibility for presenting diversified programming and being made to admit that they came up short,” dominant discursive forces decided to employ “the management style of a liberal idealism that has not yet learned to do more than tolerate social and cultural differences.”⁴⁴ The enactment of this strategy led to the effective neo-liberalization of the multicultural televisual discourse Gray championed in *Watching Race*. In order to maximize profits, networks worked to represent difference not as something to be recognized, celebrated, or interrogated but as an item on a “Retain as Much Audience as Possible” checklist that could be fulfilled through visible racial markers alone. Neo-liberal multiculturalism is an economized, cost-effective illusion of diversity that avoids sincere engagement with the potential realities of the racialized bodies it employs to make shows less

white. Thus, the logic of assimilation has long governed minority presence on television resulting in a pattern of invisibility, silence, or relegation for Black characters; the perpetuation of problematic stereotypes; and a lack of cultural or historical specificity when characters of color are present.

Gray observes that these governing discursive strategies can be subject to change and offers that “national legibility, social integration, and cultural belonging may no longer be the cultural logic that defines television’s relationship to the American nation-state.”⁴⁵ If that is the case, then what *does* constitute that definition? Is it empathy production or social responsibility or solidarity or all of the above? Perhaps it is the case that some texts actively work to fit whatever that definition is, and some do not.

Gray’s work lays out a spatial metaphor and inspires several other framing sub-questions that serve the larger interest of this project. His description of the “ebb and flow” of Black representation on American broadcast television is particularly valuable. The resonant representation tide went out with the rise and wide adoption of neo-liberal multiculturalism on television, leaving Black broadcast audiences fishing for meaningful identification high and dry. Now, though, it seems the tide is on the way back in. Since the project at hand considers texts airing from 2018 to the present, I am framing the mid-2000s to mid-2010s neo-liberal multicultural environment, the Rhimes era, and its subsequent critical response as an “ebb”. What, then, has constituted the “flow”? What has changed? What has remained stagnant? If the nature of institutionally produced visibility and invisibility is episodic, what does the current episode look like? Do the Black characters in the chosen cases represent varied relationships to assimilation, both narratively and critically? Have the “minor corrections” Gray observes finally accumulated to produce more meaningful representations?

Palatable Blackness: Plastic Representation and Convergent Ethnicity

Black peoples' ability to exercise the self-definition that is so vital to the resistance of oppression on broadcast television has been gatekept to preserve the economic interests of media corporations. As such, there is a perpetual tension between "the ideal of racial integration and the reality of liberal pluralism."⁴⁶ As the television industry evolves, that persistent tension "produces a periodic crisis around the representation of race."⁴⁷ The period of crisis through which I am working in this section to set up my case studies is what I'll call, for the sake of brevity, the Rhimes era. By that, I mean her rise to prominence through *Grey's* and *Scandal*, her incitement of pop culture frenzy, and the subsequent scholarly and popular criticism of representational practices across her programs, from the mid-2000's through the mid-2010's. That era was an iteration of periodic crisis, one which informed critical and academic response as well as the decisions primetime producers, especially those of color, made afterward.

Expanding on Gray's observations and work, contemporary media scholar Kristen Warner also problematizes the "integrationist model" that influenced minority representation on television not only in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, but also well into the 21st century. Looking back at *Julia*, she asserts that the show was a televisual remedy to the discomfort "racially inept" white Americans felt about apparent increases in Black political and economic agency resulting from the "one-step-forward-two-steps-back Civil Rights legislation of 1964 and 1965" that challenged the established social order.⁴⁸ This "integrative" imperative devolved into one prioritizing assimilation over the actual depiction and acceptance of Black cultural and historical specificities. In weak attempts to appease newly agential Black consumers while actively retaining historically dominant white ones, "the challenges of achieving equality were reduced to the challenge of becoming 'as good as' and 'as much like' whites as possible."⁴⁹

Warner posits that colorblind erasure of racial difference supplanted the blatantly racist modes of depiction that came before it. This discursive tactic eclipsed the potential for media institutions to engender widespread recognition, interrogation, and celebration of difference. Instead, neo-liberal discourses shifted the responsibility for successful integration from the institutions responsible for the segregation that preceded it to the individuals subjected to it.

Warner identifies the root of mediated colorblindness in “formal categories that define individuals strictly in terms of a category based on color and no other characteristic,” the “formal-race” concept undergirding legal precedent and legislative civil rights efforts.⁵⁰ In this definition, race becomes a “neutral and apolitical” descriptor that refers only to the color of one’s skin or their ancestry, divorcing raced bodies from the sociohistorical contexts from which they emerge.⁵¹ She posits that “if integration’s ultimate goal is to input difference and output sameness—in this instance, normative whiteness—television’s responsibility lies in educating citizens by giving them the images of a society where those facts are true.”⁵² Commitment to that faulty responsibility resulted in decades of flat representation with which minority audiences struggled to truly identify.

Politically, the 2008 election of Barack Obama to the presidency led many to proclaim that race had been transcended and everyone was on an even playing field. If a Black man is president, racism is done and we fixed all the things, right? Wrong. That erroneous, overzealous optimism reinforced notions of race and racism as an individual and easily overcome problem, not a deeply rooted ideological construct sewn into the foundation of the nation that has had detrimental material consequences on bodies of color for centuries. Televisually, this manifested in the separation of visibly racially marked actors/characters from narratives that acknowledged the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which people of color are embedded in reality.

Warner offers that in the 2000s network television landscape, assimilationist discourses evolved to neo-liberal multicultural ones that manifested as visual but not experiential diversity on programs. She attributes incitement for this trend, often achieved through “blindcasting” or not specifying a role’s race when casting an actor, to the aforementioned primetime television auteur Shonda Rhimes:

Grey’s Anatomy (2005-) showrunner Shonda Rhimes receives much of the credit for reintroducing the discourse of blindcasting back into mainstream consciousness after insisting ABC executives and casting directors send her a variety of color options for each role within her series. Blindcasting ultimately helped the show become a runaway success because it appeared to reinforce a multicultural society that could attract a number of audience demographics.⁵³

However, that representational strategy bolsters problematic post-race discourses making all characters “racially neutral”—a false neutrality that actually assumes whiteness as the norm and ignores or devalues alternative experiences. Though this study does not address the producorial practice of blindcasting specifically, this passage provides helpful context for understanding the mid-2000s through the mid-2010s as a period of crisis for minority media representation, as I have identified it.

Grey’s epitomizes Obama-inspired, post-race colorblind casting and writing. The show is set at a prestigious hospital in Seattle where a group of interns are beginning their surgical residency. Of that group, centered around Meredith Grey (Ellen Pompeo), one of the five interns is non-white: Sandra Oh’s Cristina Yang. Overseeing their training are three attending surgeons, two of which are Black: Chandra Wilson’s Miranda Bailey and Isaiah Washington’s Preston Burke. At the top of the foodchain is the Black Chief of Surgery, Richard Webber (James

Pickens, Jr.). As mentioned above, Rhimes wrote the roles without a specific race and saw a variety of ethnicities for each role. For the majority of the show's run, the characters are written without regard to the ethnicity of the body playing the role, even when a conflict or plot point would logically follow from it or is at odds with it. For instance, Grey-Sloan Memorial Hospital has three Black doctors among its leadership in *Washington*, a state in which Black people are not even the largest racial minority, let alone a substantial subset of the population (4.5% according to the 2020 Census).⁵⁴ Moreover, arcs like the romance between Burke and Yang, a Black man and an Asian woman, continued to ignore the influence of race even though it would likely be a source of misunderstanding or conflict in reality. For example, Burke's parents initially oppose to their romantic involvement not because of racial or cultural difference, but because his mother finds Cristina's personality off-putting.⁵⁵

The normative whiteness reinforced by ignoring actors' race when writing for their characters is more than superficially problematic for audiences of color. Drawing on literary scholar Sujata Iyengar's work, Warner highlights that ignoring one's race, as signified by skin color, "creates an existential crisis of identity for the raced body," as it is sociohistorically significant in real life, even if it is not in the text.⁵⁶ To quote Iyengar directly, "[f]or reviewer, critic, actor, or director to ignore the social meanings of skin color and embodied gender in either a Renaissance or in a contemporary sense is an act of bad faith."⁵⁷ I argue that the cases at hand, through one mechanism or another and to varying degrees of success, are pushing back against the paradigm of racial ignorance in favor of a specificity that can mitigate the "existential crisis" experienced by people of color consuming media. The chosen shows appropriate generic conventions of network staples and utilize distinct storytelling practices that allow Black authenticity to flourish without necessarily centering perpetual struggle. For example, *9-1-1*'s

female firefighter Hen occupies a complex and uniquely intersectional identity. She is Black, gay, married, a parent, solidly middle-class and, in recent seasons, in medical school on top of her excelling at her day job.

Warner writes that often, when producers do attempt to address race in a colorblindly constructed narrative world, they seek to minimize risk and maximize efficiency by using formulas and stereotypes as “inexhaustible resources” for telling “diverse” stories.⁵⁸ She points to efficiency as a primary driver and incentivizing variable of the television industry. Stereotypes, she explicates, are efficient. As Stuart Hall defines them, stereotypes “get hold of the few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them and fix them without change or development to eternity.”⁵⁹ So essentially, in the economic interest of maintaining narrative efficiency for network programs, Black actors and characters often get stuck in limiting roles.

For example, “the Black best friend” is a trope that abounds in media from the era at hand. A hipper iteration of the “mammy,” the Black best friend always has a firm but kind word or witty comeback for the white main character and seems to put their wellbeing before her own. Rhimes-era CW fantasy drama *The Vampire Diaries* offers a prime example, as it also employed blindcasting to fill out its ensemble and colorblind writing to advance its narratives. Bonnie Bennett (Kat Graham) played long-time best friend and recently discovered witch to the white protagonist’s (Nina Dobrev) vampire-enamored human. The show is set in fictional Mystic Falls, Virginia and features frequent flashbacks to the Civil War but never acknowledges that Bonnie and other Black characters’ presence on the show implies descendance from enslaved people. Moreover, Bonnie is constantly called upon to intervene mystically for her white counterparts,

often at the cost of her own wellbeing, more than once at the cost of her life. She is positioned as a nearly infallible, heroic paragon of loyalty and selflessness, recalling the “mystical negro” in addition to the mammy trope, devoid of Black cultural specificity *and* denied dynamic narrative development.⁶⁰

In the aftermath of the Rhimes era, more Black women are at the center of stories being told on primetime, not just as put upon supporting characters. *Scandal* and *HTGAWM* certainly illustrated that primetime shows could succeed with Black women driving the narratives. Current texts are expanding and challenging what those narratives can be.

Limiting roles like Bonnie Bennett beget what Warner calls “plastic representation.” She writes that using stereotypes as a shorthand for character development and attempting to make that character “positive” through superficial elements of respectability result in “thinly written characters of color with a mirage of depth.”⁶¹ On the other hand, the reactionary strategy of “writing-by-stereotype-reversal” ends up only functioning to “reinforce long-held tropes” as illustrated in the brief character analysis above.⁶² She indicts the often-invoked call “representation matters” for its reliance on “overdetermined and overly reductive notions of so-called ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ representations” for undermining the importance of complexity and resonance with actual Black experiences within those representations.⁶³ The unfortunate representational outcome of this reductive mindset is a malleable, artificial, inorganic Blackness that is manipulated to suit the whims of network executives and the audiences that they presume are white.⁶⁴

Nominal diversity—visible racial differences among the cast in a text written to fit a normative whiteness—is less than the bare minimum. For a long time, perhaps still in some cases, producers stopped there and patted themselves on the back for being “progressive.” The

resulting representations were vacuous, vapid, lacking in meaningful detail. Warner highlights that “[details] make characters real and their realness is what makes them relatable, not their ‘similarity to me.’ Specificity adds those details and enables characters to become more than types.”⁶⁵ What viewers of color actually desire is specific, substantive, and intentional depiction of their lived but underrepresented realities that “connect with the histories and experiences of the culture the character’s body inhabits.”⁶⁶ Warner underscores that “the true indicator of the progress that is desired lies in showcasing “how all those specifically Black lives exist and thrive *as* themselves, not as the ones whom they happen to be cast to represent.”⁶⁷

Warner offers that, occasionally, individual creators are given space and resources for “actively fighting against hegemonic practices”:

These showrunners/producers emerge from outside Hollywood industry and are allowed to create a different kind of television product based on their credibility and experience in another medium. Furthermore, these programs have more potential to resist those colorblind imperatives if they are not on network television. . . . Nevertheless, these types of programs tend not to air on the broadcast networks since they pose such large risks for attracting and entertaining a mass audience, rendering cable the destination for less conventional and/or less mainstream programming.⁶⁸

The cases I examine illustrate a shift in that paradigm, as they depict more culturally specific Blackness on broadcast networks. The case of Quinta Brunson’s *Abbott Elementary* especially, given its critical and popular success and her creative trajectory prior to her broadcast presence, speaks to the recent expansion of the above industrial behavior beyond pay cable/subscription venues.

Although plastic representation was the low-hanging bar for much of the last half century of network television history, Warner contends that “...at times the industry should be willing to take on greater than-average risks. For example, when a network is in transition or crisis, a deviation from a formula engineered by idiosyncratic talents might be valued.”⁶⁹ Being that the industry views cultural specificity as risky, out of these transitions/crises emerge the kinds of resonant representation that many producers have historically avoided. It is safe to say that the broadcast industry is in a state of both transition and crisis. Ubiquitous and ever-multiplying streaming services vie for consumer attention 24/7. Additionally, the post-Rhimes cultural moment finds Black audiences looking for something new and overall increased social consciousness among consumers of all races. This moment of industrial flux seems jarring enough for networks to take risks and deviate further from the norm than in the past. I believe that the chosen cases in this study illustrate the embrace of that risk resulting in more creative opportunities for producers of color and, therefore, more identificatory opportunities for consumers of color. Ultimately, resonant diversity is best achieved not only when Black and Brown bodies appear on screens, but also when Black and Brown creatives have space behind the scenes to bring the culturally grounded narratives they know best to life. The fact that it takes the major disturbance of the industry to produce these opportunities is worthy of exploration that goes beyond the scope of this project but worth noting, nonetheless. What does lie within the scope of this project is the representational and industrial analysis of three shows that demonstrate a reorientation in storytelling about Black women on broadcast television networks.

Critical Method

This project will employ in-depth textual analyses of Black female characters on Fox’s *9-1-1*, The CW’s *All American: Homecoming*, and ABC’s *Abbott Elementary*. The study focuses

on lead and regular characters and will identify key characteristics and storylines that distinguish their portrayal of Black womanhood from historical precedent and contemporary texts.

Additionally, I will situate those analyses within each network's unique relationship to the current industrial environment through interviews and other extratextual content in which those involved in producing these texts share their perspectives on their shows' industrial situation and ideological function.

Chapter Overview

Each chapter offers an update to Gray's discursive frames in addition to analyses of contemporary texts. In chapter one, I argue that *9-1-1* exhibits what I term an acculturative discourse to represent the Black women on the program. Instead of assimilation's outright erasure of difference, acculturation recognizes the minoritized identity of characters and how that marginalization might affect their experiences. This chapter highlights how the show leverages executive producer and star Angela Bassett's extra- and intertextual star power to imbue the historically white and male cop archetype with Black femininity. Additionally, I investigate how it reaches into complex and resonant representations of Black womanhood (unlike most texts in the previous era). I argue that it does so through some socially conscious storylines and, primarily, character Henrietta Wilson's (Aisha Hinds) intersectional identity as a Black, gay public servant. Those aspects of the program, however, are embedded in a staple assimilationist format: the procedural drama. I argue that while *9-1-1* acknowledges and celebrates these characters' identities, it maintains ties to the conventions of a familiar and beloved genre; it positions these women as individual agents of change through their personal commitment to systems designed to exclude and mistreat them, instead of indicting the flaws of the white masculinity-predicated institutions that employ them.

In chapter two, I frame The CW's *All American: Homecoming* (AAH) as exemplary of a practice I call industrial pluralism: the repackaging of traditionally white television paradigms in Black cast stories under the creative direction of Black women showrunners. Like the concept defined previously, industrial pluralism employs a form of "separate-but-equal" logic that allows for a focus on exclusively Black people. Unlike Gray's concept, though, it does so not only through narrative conventions that are rooted in hegemonic values and modes of storytelling, but also through industrial and creative framing meant to make the practice seem more transgressive than it is. The CW is synonymous with teen/young adult drama and has been since the netlet's conception. Until the mid-2010s, the vast majority of the shows it produced were infamously antithetical to meaningful minority representation, that is, almost exclusively white. Around 2015, though, the channel began to pursue more minority-cast and produced programming among its typical experimental and niche fare. AAH is the most recent in a line of shows greenlit in this wave and differs substantially from other shows the network has produced in terms of cast make up, setting, and subject matter. The entirety of the main/regular cast is Black. Many of the plot points and arcs address issues and rituals specific to historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Still, the show employs easily recognizable, hallmark conventions of the young adult drama for which its parent network is so well known, a reputation it established through predominantly white casts curated to court a young white audience. I briefly address the network's history with Black feminine representation, investigate how The CW's industrial position influenced the show's creation, and explicate how the program exemplifies industrial pluralist practice as evidenced by showrunner Nkechi Okoro Carroll's own discursive framing of the show.

Chapter three will explore *Abbott Elementary* (*Abbott*) as a text that employs a reflective discursive strategy to depict a range of Black feminine experiences. I define a reflective discourse as one that, like Gray's multiculturalism, "engages cultural politics of difference within the sign of Blackness" but without the neoliberal baggage that Gray's term has accrued over the last two decades. The sitcom plays a major role in Black television representation history. Unlike those stage-set multi-camera products, though, *Abbott* appropriates the mockumentary style popularized by *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Modern Family* to speak to the experience of public school teachers. Those three shows and others like them adopted a vérité single camera format as a response to the inherent conservatism of the sitcom format: its adherence to both traditional modes of television production and traditional nuclear domestic values. Meant to appeal to young, educated, liberal audiences, the mockumentary invited knowing reflection from its presumably up-market and intellectually sophisticated audiences. *Abbott* actually pokes at those white liberal mockumentary sensibilities by tethering them to the only white man on the cast and portraying him as corny, bumbling try-hard. Moreover, Quinta Brunson's authorial voice, the three Black female characters in the main ensemble, and *Abbott*'s West Philly setting work together to tell stories that do not necessarily hinge on its characters' race. Rather, it presents a range of Black feminine characterizations that illustrate how the confluence of identities and experiences can have varied results for Black women's relationships to institutions like public education, as well as their relationships to one another.

I will conclude the project with a brief fourth case study of ABC's *The Rookie: Feds* as another manifestation of broadcast television responding to contemporary industrial trends and practices. Finally, I will integrate major takeaways from all four case studies, using them as

foundation for discussing my work's implications and future directions for further scholarship on Black feminine representation on broadcast television.

CHAPTER 1

DISPATCHING BLACK WOMEN: PROCEDURAL ACCULTURATION ON *9-1-1*

Premiering in January of 2018, the procedural drama *9-1-1* has consistently been among broadcast television network Fox's top performing primetime series. Often as ridiculous as it is heartwarming, the series follows first responders—emergency call dispatchers, firefighter/paramedics, and police officers—as they encounter harrowing situations while working to protect the city of Los Angeles. The show was developed by prolific television creators Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Tim Minear. Traditionally, ensemble broadcast procedurals produced largely by white men have adopted assimilationist strategies in representing people of color on these shows if they opt to represent them at all. Consistent with Gray's conception of this discursive paradigm, they have traditionally sought to eliminate difference, letting the visible presence of raced bodies and not portrayal of raced experiences illustrate "progress." So, a show like *9-1-1* is certainly not the first place most would look for intersectional feminist representation, but the show unexpectedly intertwines many of the conventions of a traditionally assimilationist drama with purposeful investigation of complex Black feminine experiences.

In addition to the three creators mentioned above, award-winning Black actress Angela Bassett acts an executive producer and stars as LAPD officer Athena Grant-Nash. Also among the core ensemble is Aisha Hinds's Henrietta "Hen" Wilson, a Black lesbian firefighter/paramedic at House 118 who, like Athena, is a wife and mother who must balance the demands of an intense career and family life. As Black women and civil servants, Athena and Hen exist at the intersections of multiple oppressed identities. Intersectionality, as articulated by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in her landmark 1989 essay, recognizes that people can be

oppressed in multiple ways. Operating under not *just* racism or not *just* sexism, simplistic understandings of each often erases the complexity and nuance of Black women's experiences. Crenshaw draws on Black Feminism to assert that, "[b]ecause the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."⁷⁰ Though not a perfect model of intersectional feminism, *9-1-1* does work to confront the realities of intersectional identity in ways that are important given its high accessibility as a broadcast, freely available show.

Black creators', producers', and actors' presence and work to represent their experiences and those of other Black people on broadcast networks has the capacity to challenge the oppressive forces that limit Black agency. Their exploitation of those possibilities to their full extent or the lack thereof merits critical investigation. In the case at hand, Angela Bassett's executive producer status opens the door for both her and Hinds to bring their lived experiences to the characters they play.

I believe that *9-1-1*'s imperfect and measured exploration of Black feminist intersectionality through Athena and Hen's characters is a response to industrial precarity. In the current media landscape—one diversifying in terms of delivery mechanisms, production practices, and audience demographics—traditional networks aim to retain as much of their increasingly fragmenting audience as possible while still appeasing the commercial broadcast media system. The task of representing minorities realistically asks creatives to navigate the complex interplay between traditional notions of positivity/negativity and generic narrative expectations carefully.

As outlined in the introductory chapter, the assimilationist discourse that Gray derides as insufficient for representing Black people on television never really went anywhere. It just repackaged itself as neoliberal multiculturalism. Regardless of its name, the strategy worked to minimize and ignore difference, relying primarily on appearance for its articulation and routinely ignoring cultural and ethnic specificities. Take, to expand upon an example cited in the introduction, Shonda Rhimes' *Grey's Anatomy*. Its drama played out among a workplace ensemble that, across the seasons, included several characters occupying racially minoritized identities: Black (Webber, Bailey, Burke, Jackson Avery, Maggie Grey), Korean (Yang), and ambiguously Latina (Callie Torres). The ever-changing and expanding cast's visible diversity belied the show's rare and shallow-if-present treatment of racially influenced experiences those characters might have.

In its chronicle of a bunch of hot doctors saving lives and acting inappropriately at work, *Grey's Anatomy*'s elaborate narratives demonstrated a storytelling strategy that media scholar Vincent Brook terms the "neo-platoon" format which, in a "multicultural" media environment, precipitated "convergent ethnicity" or "convergence of difference."⁷¹ He offers the following explanation of this approach's characteristics:

...first, the multiple-protagonist and interlocking-narrative structure creates a *textual interdependence* among the range of ethnicities represented; second, this interdependence is reinforced by the *egalitarian positioning* of the main characters—that is, people of color are placed on par with or even a notch above their white cohorts, both in screen time and in social or occupational standing; and finally, and most distinctively, *interracial romance* is prominently displayed.⁷²

While this strategy invites actors/characters of color into prime-time television roles and visibly diversifies casts of popular shows, it traditionally allows little to no space for cultural specificity in narratives surrounding raced characters. Essentially, the primary danger in this type of structure is the “dissolution of difference” as it manifests in the real world and the proliferation of normatively white characteristics and narratives across individuals who differ in the appearances they present, not the experiences they portray.⁷³

9-1-1 illustrates an evolution in this brand of storytelling. Like *Grey’s*, it follows a racially diverse group of men and women in high-pressure professions, intertwining their lifesaving and heroic efforts with their complicated personal lives. However, the sociocultural context of the post-Rhimes televisual era is marked by overall increased social awareness, activism, and greater appreciation for diverse individuals, experiences, and stories. As such, network programs that fit too squarely within bygone eras’ visibly diverse, narratively “race neutral” frame are unlikely to draw the interest necessary to survive on broadcast. So, unlike *Grey’s*, *9-1-1*, allows space for its Black women characters to walk through narrative arcs that directly acknowledge their complexity as individuals and their positionality as Black American women in a demanding, white male-dominated profession. Therefore, evaluating the show’s representation of Black womanhood requires reframing the discursive genre to which it is tied.

Trading Assimilation for Acculturation

Reflecting on Gray’s use of the sociological concept of assimilation to describe the reluctant integration of Black representations on American television, I would like to offer an update to that term that I believe better captures the nature of a similar discursive pattern at work in contemporary texts like *9-1-1*. Acculturation describes the “process of culture change and adaptation that occurs when individuals with different cultures come into contact.”⁷⁴ Unlike

assimilation, acculturation “acknowledges the reciprocity of the influences that cultural groups have on each other” and “entails a variety of processes and outcomes; groups and individuals within groups adopt different ways to deal with the acculturation experience, only one of which might be assimilation.”⁷⁵ Different acculturation strategies result in different manners of adaptation among acculturating individuals and situational factors can influence their course of acculturation and response to it. Notably, not all groups or individuals “[enter] into, [participate] in, or [change] in the same way during their acculturation,” for “even among individuals who have the same cultural origin and who live in the same acculturative arena,”⁷⁶ the process and its outcomes may vary.

Acculturation, then, becomes a useful discursive lens through which we can analyze texts that bring together not just bodies of color and white ones, but also the distinct cultural experiences they carry. In the case at hand, we can consider the white male dominated professions of firefighting/paramedicine and policing one culture and Black American womanhood another. Athena and Hen are the same nationality as their co-workers, but their ethnicity and social position as Black women and the “mainstream” within which their mostly white male co-workers fit presents a figurative border they must navigate in the workplace. The major obstacles they are required to confront in order to do their jobs and the real world situations which they reflect beget “acculturative stress,” which could manifest as uncertainty, anxiety, and depression. Theoretically, individuals are expected to respond to acculturative stress by “[learning] or [acquiring] the culture-specific behavioral skills that are necessary to negotiate this new cultural milieu,” including verbal and nonverbal communicative patterns and other rules, norms, and conventions that may or may not be explicitly stated.⁷⁷ Cognitively, “how people think about themselves and others in the face of intercultural encounters” can predict

acculturation strategies and outcomes.⁷⁸ Acculturation accounts for the negotiation of identities in a way that assimilation does not, thus making it better suited for exploring Black female characters on a show that follows both their team-centered, interdependent working lives and their personal struggles and triumphs at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality.

As mentioned above, assimilation is just one acculturation strategy an individual may adopt when they “do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek close interaction with other cultures (or in some cases adopt the cultural values, norms, and traditions of the new society).”⁷⁹ Another strategy relevant to this study is “integration,” which “is used by individuals with an interest in maintaining one’s original culture while having daily interactions with other groups—there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time they seek, as a member of an ethnocultural group, to participate as an integral part of the larger social network.” Social psychologists David Sam and John Berry offer that the integration strategy is “the most adaptive” and is associated with better psychological adaptation—one’s satisfaction and “overall emotional or psychological well-being”—and sociocultural adaptation—one’s ability to acquire “appropriate sociocultural skills” to live effectively in the cultural contact situation.⁸⁰ They attribute integration’s efficacy to the “double competence” and “double resources” that undergird this strategy, as an individual who has adopted it has access to competencies and resources both from their own ethnic/cultural group and from society into which they are integrating. Though they assert that integration is the most effective acculturation strategy that yields the most positive adaptive outcomes, Sam and Berry do acknowledge that the strategy an acculturating individual adopts and their ability to execute it successfully is highly contingent upon the attitudes the members of the new group and the larger society have toward people seeking inclusion.⁸¹

Sam and Berry's observations are tied to very real circumstances with very real, often high stakes for the material conditions of peoples' lives. *9-1-1*, in contrast, is a scripted television series, and Athena and Hen are fictional characters. The fictional world in which they exist mirrors ours, though, and its existence is guided by the goals of a for-profit television network. For the network to be profitable, it has to retain a morphing audience with increased interest in and demand for diverse experiences. However, they must also consider both viewers and advertisers who expect "traditional" television—not the wild and wacky, out-of-the-box stuff streamers are producing. Hence, the creative turn to acculturation to address both concerns at once.

On *9-1-1*, Athena and Hen acculturate to their workplaces because they want to do work that they are passionate about. They do not, however, completely give up their cultural and experiential ties to Black womanhood to do so, they are not just a police sergeant and a firefighter/paramedic who are written "neutrally" and just so happen to be Black. As I will demonstrate in the following analyses, *9-1-1* takes up an integrative acculturation discourse in order to meet the demands of giving audiences an all-in-this-together workplace procedural drama while also giving the Black women characters attributes and characteristics that recognize and celebrate their identities. As it plays out on network television, this strategy highlights more ethnic pride and individual agency than an assimilationist discourse. Assimilationism was largely executed by white producers and creators who sought to make characters' Blackness and the cultural elements that came with it invisible in service of maintaining a lucrative mainstream audience.

In the acculturation discourse I am proposing, the goal is still to attract the largest audience possible, but the audience now boasts a different demographic makeup and demands

producers pursue greater diversity in storytelling in order to keep this audience watching and advertisers calling. Thus, the commercial demands of broadcast television persist and are evident in both the show's promotion and its engagement with corporate sponsors. For instance, the season one trailer shows each of the headlining stars in action: Connie Britton as Abby working in the dispatch center; Peter Krause as Bobby leading the team through rescues; and Angela Bassett as Athena busting down doors and taking down bad guys. The two-minute clip also shows snippets of them in their home settings, the most dramatic and heartwarming scenes, of course. In several ways, this short promotional video promises to give viewers and advertisers what they expect from a primetime procedural drama about emergency responders: over-the-top heroics, drama, and heartfelt stories that will draw people in and sell paper towels, Nissans, air freshener and, most conspicuously, Apple iPhones which are noticeably displayed almost every time a character makes a call—which, on a show about emergencies with a lot of characters, is quite often.⁸² Furthermore, it promises to do so with a trio of familiar, verified, racially integrated Hollywood stars at the forefront.

Angela Bassett's Starpower as a Character All Its Own

Recognizing how Blackness is culturally influential and shapes lived experiences, making it legible outside of just skin color, is a task *9-1-1* must manage in order to execute the acculturative representational strategy described above. While the show's writing certainly does function to highlight Athena and Hen's Black cultural ties and intersectional experiences, I argue that Angela Bassett's mere presence on the program's cast and slate of executive producers is meant to bridge the gap between a historically exclusive genre and a historically underrepresented audience. Athena challenges the archetype of the TV cop and supports an

acculturative representation strategy simply by virtue of the indelible Blackness and star power of the actress who plays her.

Being among the first to sign on and starring as the show's only major policing character Athena Grant-Nash, Bassett is likely the initial draw to the series for many, including myself. As a Black person with cable in the 2000s through 2010s I, along with other viewers of BET/TVOne/Centric, have been caught up in the Black film syndication loop on many a weekend. Films featuring Angela Bassett were a staple in these repetitive programming blocks, with *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006), *Meet the Browns* (2008), and *Jumping the Broom* (2011) in heavy rotation. She is a Hollywood legend, beloved fiercely by Black audiences but also achieving critical acclaim and immense crossover success, beginning with her powerhouse portrayal of Tina Turner in 1993's *What's Love Got to Do with It* (*What's Love*) up to her most recent portrayal of Queen Ramonda in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022), both of which earned her Oscar nominations for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress in 1994 and 2023, respectively. Her being chosen to headline the *9-1-1* ensemble is certainly a testament to her undeniable talent, but her familiarity to both Black and "mainstream" audiences is an added draw for producers and network executives looking to bolster a dwindling viewership.

Bassett has an impressive resume on both big and small screens. Notably, she has starred in four seasons of *9-1-1* creator and prolific television producer Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story* (*AHS*), earning Emmy nominations along the way. Her relationship with Murphy is part of what led her to take on the role as a star of a broadcast drama, something much different from most of her successful projects. Asked what drew her to a "long-term character" instead of

the film roles she could surely secure, Bassett had the following to say about working with a creator that she knew and trusted:

The relationship I had developed with Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk and that company had been so good, and so good for women, and for mature women, well, young women as well! Just a different aesthetic, across the spectrum. Such respect and regard for that... The idea of being a cop and complicated relationships. The relationship she has with her husband and what we were going to go into... So, all of that was really sort of compelling, as the previous 4 years had been in that company.⁸³

So, after working on *AHS*, Bassett had established a clearly productive working relationship with a television creator who is committed to telling different kinds of stories, especially those centering women who might not usually have the opportunity to lead them. For two primary reasons, it is likely that the assurance of her executive producer credit helped as well. First, the salary per episode she receives as EP/star is astronomical: upwards of \$450,000 according to a 2021 *Deadline* article.⁸⁴ Second and more important to the focus of this project, it affords her a degree of creative control and freedom that she may not be promised elsewhere and that she has certainly been hard-pressed to find for much of her career as a Black actress in Hollywood.

I have stated previously that, in the ideological vehicle of popular media, Black women have historically been denied the self-definition vital to their holistic wellbeing by white male industrial gatekeepers. Bassett articulates that despite her standing now, her trajectory encountered the same obstacles and has shaped her outlook on her work. In a 2023 interview with *Variety*, she shared an anecdote from working on *What's Love* that demonstrated as much:

If I wanted to talk about [ideas she had for her character/performance] or ask about a take and I asked, ‘Well, I would like what if I tried that?’, the response was, ‘No.’ [Asking questions/making suggestions] was a male thing, and I would just have to do it. ‘You’re the lowly actor’ or whatever. . . I remember thinking, ‘It’s a war, you’re going to have to get to the end and it’s going to be fine.’ Once I saw the first dailies, I could have confidence that what we were doing resonated and had power. It was authentic and believable, and it looked good. . . I thought, ‘OK, I won’t [ask]. I’ll just do it in the scene.’⁸⁵

In this story, Bassett displays a long held self-definitive consciousness, reflecting a Black Feminist outlook that has undoubtedly influenced how she approached projects throughout her career. In Ryan Murphy and Fox’s attempt maintain interest in broadcast during industry flux, it seems that they were willing to grant her that control, almost from the very conception of the show.

As I will explore further in the analyses, Bassett brings her experiences in and knowledge of the real world to Athena’s character in a way that ties her to our social reality, honoring viewers who can identify and recognizes systemic difficulties with which Black women are, unfortunately, familiar. At the same time that *9-1-1*’s efforts to recognize and celebrate the intersectionality of the Black women on the show are noteworthy, it is also imperative to acknowledge that it is still subjected to the commercial mandate of American broadcast television. That mandate and the ensemble procedural format prioritize representing protagonists as exceptional individuals who transcend institutional problems, instead of calling out the institutions responsible

Character Case Study: Athena

While Bassett's intertextual ties and authoritative presence on *9-1-1* are partly responsible for its distinct fusion of the workplace procedural and acculturative narrative strategy, it is not necessarily successful in evading the trappings of the paradigm of police representation on American network television. Regardless of the identities of the officer, the institution of American policing is fundamentally tied to hegemonic standards of heroism and justice that have been crafted by and associated with white maleness for the entirety of the country's existence. Pulling a Black woman into such a role on television requires attempts at reconciling the dissonance between American racial history and the goal of portraying an endearing protagonist. Thinking in theoretical terms explored previously, assimilationist representations of Black police officers ignore not only the challenges that a Black officer would likely face in real life, but also the fraught history and relationship between minoritized identities and the police. However, as this analysis will demonstrate, the acculturative approach to Athena's characterization paradoxically acknowledges and celebrates her intersectionality while also upholding an assimilationist outlook on racism in policing.

In seasons one and two, Athena's personal story arcs revolve around her divorce from her recently out-of-the-closet husband, her attempts to help her daughter deal with a ruthless school bully, and her desire to find herself again as she heals from the dissolution of her marriage. Of course, all of these, at one time or another, intersect with her duties as an LAPD officer. While these narratives are not necessarily tied to her racial or gendered identity, the show develops these plots such that we recognize how the intersection of Athena's race and gender raises the stakes in these situations.

Athena's articulation of her intersectional outlook is most pronounced in her personal storylines, particularly those dealing with the dissolution and creation of her romantic

relationships. In the pilot episode, we learn that Athena and her husband are divorcing after 14 years of marriage. Throughout seasons one and two, we watch her deal with those emotions, navigate co-parenting their two children, and learn what it means to date in her fifties. In episode 1.9, “Trapped,” she begins a new relationship with a younger man, but it ends promptly because she’s not willing to be as serious about their future as he wants her to be:

Athena: “I just got out of a 14-year marriage to a guy I *thought* I knew. I’m figuring out how to be single—at 50. I’m not looking to jump into another relationship. I want sex with no strings. I don’t need dinners or weekend getaways! I got married because my biological clock was ticking. I stayed married for the kids. I’m getting divorced for myself. I’m not ready for this. And you... You are too good to be somebody’s rebound guy.”⁸⁶

In this brief break up monologue, Athena asserts herself as an agent in forging her own identity outside of her relationship to men. As her romantic arc progresses, though, this feminist sentiment is troubled by other social and cultural factors that result from her subjection to multiple forms of oppression.

Despite expressing her desire to be single just one episode prior, Athena’s journey to finding love again continues in episode 1.10, “A Whole New You,” when she agrees to go on a date with Bobby, Captain Nash of firehouse 118. The first season finale closes with them, both dressed up, sitting down at a table in a nice restaurant for their first date. Apparently, things went well, because in the season two premier, “Under Pressure,” they secretly make out while responding to a call, which is confusing for three reasons. First, seeing Angela Bassett and Peter Krause kiss is jarring. Second, they are at work. Finally and most important to this plot’s development, we soon learn Athena wants to keep their budding relationship just between the

two of them or, in this scene, between two municipal emergency response vehicles. Later in the episode, when the pair is off duty, Bobby expresses his desire to “go out into the world as a couple,” which Athena promptly shoots down. He brings it up again later in the episode, this time he presses the issue. At first, she waves him off again, saying she likes spending time with him most when it is just the two of them away from other people. When he presses further, asking “what she’s hiding from” she finally admits the source of her reluctance:

Athena: “This... is not the same for you and me.”

Bobby: “It’s a Black/white thing? I don’t...”

A: “Are you crazy?!”

B: “Am I?”

A: “For you, this is a sign of you coming back to life after a tragic loss. It’s a redemption. For me, it’s more complicated than that.”

B: “Okay, how is this not a redemption for you? Because it’s proof you can love again, you can trust again...”

A: “No one in my family has ever gotten divorced. I am the first failure.”

B: “Hey. Divorce is not a failure.”

A: “What do you know about it?! Are you a woman?! Are you a Black woman who can’t keep her man?! The stigma of that... Now, you want me to go out on the town like a peacock showing you off like nothing ever happened. How’s that gonna make me look?”

B: “Like a survivor.”

A: “Like a tramp!”

B: “Come on, Athena. That’s crazy. Nobody’s gonna think that. And even if they do, who cares?!”

A: “Well, *you*, have the luxury of not caring. I’m trying to do right by us.”

...

A: “I’m ashamed! I’m ashamed of us! I’m ashamed of you! I’m ashamed of being happy! See! I told you. It’s complicated.”⁸⁷

Bobby proceeds to ask her to leave. Later in the episode, after Athena receives some encouragement from Michael, she apologizes and officially makes their entanglement public, kissing him in the firehouse in front of the rest of the ensemble.

Here, Athena articulates that she is concerned about the optics of being a Black, middle aged, recently divorced woman who is dating again. She directly addresses the narrative of a Black woman being unable to “keep her man” and how she is scared of that stereotype being applied to her. Both the recognition that this sort of stigma exists and Athena’s fear of it are a departure from the assimilationist narrative strategy of constructing conflict as completely separate from the character’s race as signified by skin color.

After their engagement later in the season, this idea of shame/pressure comes back around when Athena’s parents visit in 2.11, “New Beginnings.” Athena’s mother, Beatrice, is rude to Bobby from the time they arrive. Having had enough, Athena confronts her mother about her behavior and Beatrice reveals the root of her animosity:

Athena: “You never want to help! You just want to tell me where I screwed up!”

Beatrice: “Because you never learn. You just jump into everything without thinking it through, without considering the consequences! ‘I’m going to move to Los Angeles,’ ‘I’m going to drop out of law school,’ ‘I’m going to become a cop,’

I'm going to marry a gay man,' 'I'm going to marry a white man!' Sometimes I think it's a miracle those kids are alive when you're..."⁸⁸

Both Athena's hesitation to committing to the relationships described above and her mother's harangue about her recklessness are examples of the way her positionality influences her narrative. In episode 2.1, she is afraid of looking like a "bad" woman and mother—one who is indifferent toward her "failed" marriage and her responsibilities as a wife and parent. In episode 2.11, Beatrice essentially tells her that she is, in fact, all of those things. Her own awareness of and anxiety about the stigma surrounding Black women and marriage as well as her mother's clear disapproval of her personal and career trajectory—though manifesting as maternal concern—are dually rooted in racist and sexist notions of how one should properly perform their Black womanhood.

While Athena's romantic arc over the first couple of seasons directly addresses how her social position as a Black woman influences her personal life, that aspect of her identity takes a back seat and the character's assimilationist ties to its cop drama forbearers become more pronounced in ways that temper the intersectionality she presents elsewhere. These narrative points combine the traditional ideas of American police as heroes and Athena's identity to mixed and, frankly, weird results that ultimately reaffirm the supposed utility and nobility of policing as an institution.

In 3.5, "Rage," Michael and the kids are driving home from visiting family. They are pulled over by two white cops, the older of which cites expired tags as the reason for the stop. Michael does what many Black Americans are taught to do should they ever be stopped by the police: he keeps his hands visible, narrates as he reaches for his license and registration, and is supremely polite despite the officer's curtness. Even still, the stop escalates quickly as the older

officer asks Michael to step out of the vehicle, eventually slamming him to the hood when May gets out of the passenger seat to record the incident. The commotion wakes Harry, who was sleeping in the back seat and apparently not visible to the younger officer who draws his gun and points it at the scared and confused boy, hands up and eyes wide. Only after Michael desperately states that his wife is LAPD Sergeant Athena Grant are they let go, the older officer wishing them a nice night as if nothing happened before driving away leaving Michael clutching May and Harry.

The next scene finds Michael, May, and Harry back at the house discussing what happened. Michael is understandably upset and is put off that Athena is not:

Michael: “‘Shoot first and then questions ask questions later,’ that’s how they’re trained!”

Athena: “But, they didn’t fire their weapons, thank God. All right? It was just a bad stop. They happen.”

M: “They pulled their guns, Athena! It wasn’t just a bad stop!”

...

H: “Why did they do that to us?”

A: “Because they were afraid, honey, and they overreacted.”

M: “They were afraid because they saw me as a big, scary, Black man.”

A: “Well, arguing with the police probably wasn’t the best choice.”

M: “Wait a minute, are you blaming me for this?”

A: “No!”

M: “Well, you’re giving them the benefit of the doubt.”

A: “Because I *am* them! All right? I know what it’s like. You’re walking up to a car, all right, you’re out in the open, exposed, you don’t know what’s waiting for you when you walk up to that window.”

...

May: “How can you be a cop when they treat Black people like this?”

A: “It is not all cops, May. The good outnumber the bad.”

May: “Not when the good choose to look the other way when the bad do stuff like this.”

A: “No one is looking the other way.”

M: “Really? Because those cops are going home tonight, and they’ll probably sleep easy; business as usual for them. But our son and daughter are sitting here traumatized!”

May, having had enough, stands up and says she’ll post the video she took online so the cops who stopped them can’t escape the incident. Athena swiftly and sternly shuts her down, saying she does not want May and Harry’s faces forever associated with that confrontation and video. Michael sarcastically agrees, adding that since no one got shot, it “probably wouldn’t get that much of a reaction anyway.”

A: “Michael. The police are not the enemy, all right. It is not us versus them. I do not want to teach our kids that.”

M: “Then tell your colleagues that. Because that’s how I felt when they *pulled a gun out on our son!*”⁸⁹

Aside from showcasing the breadth of Angela Bassett and Rockmond Dunbar’s abilities in portraying the TV-PG version of the fallout of an all too real situation, this tense scene reveals

some critical information about Athena's outlook. She explicitly makes the "not all cops" argument and actively identifies with her family's aggressors. On her next shift, as she reviews the body cam footage, her supervisor finds her to talk about what happened, assuring her that she is recommending suspension without pay for the officers involved while the department investigates and pushing for disciplinary action. However, both she and Athena both recognize that "real" and "satisfying" consequences for the two men are unlikely, despite the older one's file full of complaints for undue force from almost exclusively Black and Brown civilians. Taking matters into her own hands, Athena pulls an off-duty Reynolds, the older of the two aggressive officers, over as he makes his way home from a bar and performs a field sobriety test on him. He makes some weak excuses for his treatment of her family, stating he didn't know they were related to her when he stopped them. Athena points out that they were lucky, then, because anybody else's family might not have made it out of that situation at all. When he threatens to report her for "retribution," she responds, "If it were retribution, I would've done it when your kids were in the car."⁹⁰ He offers one more halfhearted apology before she hands him back his documents and wishes him a "nice night" as she turns to get back in her squad car.

While it does recognize the way that Athena's Blackness and her commitment to her career as a police officer are at odds, her treatment of the situation above reflects the assimilationist strategy of individualizing institutional issues instead of truly questioning the institution's validity. Sure, Athena and her lieutenant articulate some commitment seeing the offending officers pay for their racism, but they are ultimately resigned to doing so through the flawed channels of the very same system that allowed (encouraged) Reynolds to act this way in the first place. Integrative acculturation sees individuals pick and choose what parts of their new/original cultural identities they want to display. In this scenario, we see Athena display an

awareness of the reality of American policing for Black people while also refusing to truly process the issue from a perspective other than as a member of that same institution. Her pride in her intersectional identity, which she's occupied since birth, exists alongside her pride in being a police officer, which has developed over the course of her career. That is where that plotline ends, but the tension between Athena's race and her job continues throughout the third season and into the next, even if it is not always addressed in the show's writing like it was above.

Episode 3.7, "Athena Begins," sees a young Athena Carter drop out of law school to join the LAPD after meeting and falling in love with an officer who was recruiting on her campus. The majority of the episode is a flashback that begins in 1989 when Athena met Emmett, the young Black officer who convinced her to join the force and would eventually become her fiancé, though he was murdered before they could marry. On their first date, she asks him how he decided to join the police force:

Emmett: "Sixth grade. Two narcotics detectives came to my class. They had a slide presentation for us... Crime scene photos. Pictures of people who died because of drugs. The way those guys talked about our world, our community, how broken it was, it opened my eyes. That's when I knew I had to do something to make it better."⁹¹

In the aftermath of Emmett's murder two years later, Athena echoes not only his sentiments for the value of police work, but also the "not all cops" refrain she would use in arguing with her family nearly 30 years later. As she and her mother watch the footage of Rodney King being beaten by a gang of white LAPD officers during what she calls a "traffic stop gone wrong," she makes this case for staying in the department despite her tragic loss and her mother's demands not to:

Athena: “That is why I need to stay here! So there can be more officers like me, and less like them.”

Beatrice: “What difference does that make?!”

Athena: “Those cops, they think they’re doing the right thing. Someone needs to show them that they are wrong.”⁹²

Even 1991 Athena was determined to take on the sins of a system that was designed to oppress Americans of color. The episode ends with her arresting Emmett’s killer, a now-reformed Black man whose been at large for almost three decades.

Athena is not going to be a radical anti-police activist, because she is a network TV cop. Athena *is* going to be good at her job and run headlong into danger, because she is a network TV cop. However, her unwavering dedication to her job, even in the face of its state sponsored mistreatment of Black people, is troubling. Not only are the politics of her chosen career at odds with her racial and cultural backgrounds, it also continuously requires her to put her body—her Black, female body—in harm’s way in the name of what we know to be a flawed justice system. Nowhere is this particular dimension of the tension between her identity and work more evident and less explored than in the “Realtor Rapist” storyline. In the previous dialogue about her job, her cognizance and appreciation for her position as Black woman paradoxically coexist with her belief in and commitment to the institution of policing. In the arc below, that belief and commitment seem to overtake the recognition of her positionality.

In episode 3.16, “The One That Got Away,” Athena begins what will become the seasons-long pursuit of a serial rapist, a rich white man named Jeffery Hudson, eventually nicknamed “Realtor Rapist” because of his profession and M.O. (his victims are women to whom he has sold houses). In 3.17, “Powerless,” she tracks him down alone. He viciously

attacks her just as she calls for backup and her mic remains live so that all city personnel on that radio channel, including her husband and his firehouse, hear the struggle, and their battle is intercut with their reactions. When backup and Bobby's crew arrive, the suspect is subdued, handcuffed to a pipe. Athena is a few feet away battered and barely conscious. Causing her mental and physical trauma, the incident and her injuries keep her from work for several months. In season four, he escapes custody but is eventually caught by Athena after she non-fatally shoots him in the genitals to subdue him. He escapes again and begins seeking his revenge on Athena by kidnapping her son and refusing to tell her his location unless she meets him in person. Desperate, Athena meets Hudson, kills him when he moves to attack her again, and eventually finds Harry via other means.

The content of this arc is disturbing, for sure. However, the show's failure to address the optics of a violent white man beating up then antagonizing a Black woman is, I argue, equally unsettling. This aspect of the case is never discussed. Hudson's depravity is, but how Athena's identity markers might be influencing his behavior is not. A sociopath is a sociopath, but I am inclined to ask: Would Hudson have acted this way if Athena were white? A man? A white man? Well, thinking about these hypotheticals does not really solve the representational quandary I have identified. It just highlights a pitfall in the acculturative strategy that drives the portrayal of race on *9-1-1*.

Despite being created with both Bassett and the importance of highlighting the intersectional position of Black American womanhood in mind, the character of Athena is still a raced female body in a role traditionally designed for white men. As such, the program's inconsistent recognition and ignorance of her intersectional position reduces the degree to which

Black women living in our social reality can relate to her, albeit not to the degree that ignoring it completely would.

Bassett's Athena exhibits a unique, paradoxical fusion of intersectional consciousness and an assimilationist framing of institutional deficiencies as individually overcome. The show allows for some assertion of Black feminine subjectivity, but as a protagonist and a police officer in a procedural drama on Fox, the character is bound to a set of expectations that limits her transgressive potential. It is Angela Bassett's creative and authorial presence that shoulders most of the acculturative work that Athena does. She assumes most of the characteristics of the traditional TV cop, but is a powerhouse of both Black and mainstream cultural capital asserting her Black femininity in a space that typically lacks it.

Character Case Study: Hen

As demonstrated above, the narrative strategy that *9-1-1* adopts affords some experiences specific to Black women's social positions representative space in a genre that historically avoids doing so. At the same time, however, it also places a Black female body in a role typically occupied by white men, resulting in occasional dissonance between the characterization of the "noble police officer" and identities of the person playing that role.

Notably, while on the job, Athena rides and works alone. Aside from her cooperation with dispatch and other responders, she has no partner and rarely calls for back up. As a persistent trait, this stubborn independence represents yet another tie to the white, masculine roots of the police protagonist which fuse with the character's ethnic and gender identities to produce one version of an acculturative representation strategy. In this section, I will explore how the other Black female main character, Hen, produces another.

Henrietta “Hen” Wilson (Aisha Hinds) is part of the team that fills out the rest of the *9-1-1*’s main ensemble, LAFD Firehouse 118. She is the only woman and the only Black member of the main firehouse crew which is otherwise made up of one Korean man, one Mexican man, and two white men, one of whom is the aforementioned Captain Nash. Given the ethnic makeup of the team and the nature of their work, Hen provides, perhaps, the more traditional mode of acculturative representation of the two characters analyzed in this chapter. We see evidence of Athena’s acculturation through her personal outlook and individual actions more than we do her interaction with other police officers. As one piece of a racially diverse, mostly male team, the integrative acculturation narrative strategy that Hen exhibits necessarily manifests differently from that of the previous character’s for two reasons. First, she is a supporting character, thereby allowing for more representational possibility than Athena’s role as a primary character/star in a rigidly established generic paradigm. Second, unlike Athena, most of the time that she is on screen, her interactions are with people in the same job who occupy different identities. Third, Aisha Hinds does not carry the same industrial weight that Angela Bassett does, so she requires more direct characterization through dialogue and exposition.

While they are not the primary drivers of her overall narrative arc on *9-1-1*, we do see Hen confront racism and sexism on the job and navigate the tension between her identity and occupation. These outright acknowledgements by both Hen and, sometimes, her co-workers of the ways her race and sex influence her experience of the workplace display one form of acculturative reciprocity and are a departure from the kind of assimilationist representations that largely ignored the aggressions raced bodies would actually encounter in the real world.

In episode 2.5, firehouse 118 responds to a medical call at a Westboro Baptist Church-reminiscent military funeral protest. Having already been awful to Athena who had to call for

medical back up when he his condition started to decline, the racist, middle-aged white patient refuses to let any of the paramedics treat him because all of the paramedics on call are of color: Hen is Black, Chim is Korean, and Eddie is Mexican. As the medics continue to repeatedly articulate his dire need for care and offer it to him despite his bigoted protests, his condition worsens. Eventually, he collapses and begins vomiting fecal matter, further underscoring his dire need for care, as he will die if the medics do not intervene. Obtaining consent from their captain, Hen takes the lead and the paramedics save him and transport him to the hospital.

We watch Hen deal with explicit bigotry from white men at work again four episodes later in 2.9 “Hen Begins.” The flashback episode chronicles her journey to becoming a firefighter after leaving her corporate job. As she debriefs the events that helped her come to the realization that she wants to be a paramedic with her then-girlfriend Eva, a white woman, they have the following exchange:

Hen: “Today my life finally came into focus. It’s that passion Stacey was talking about.”

Eva: “Yeah, well, passion is for rich people. And the rest of us, we work.”

H: “Well, I’m tired of just working.”

E: “Well, paramedics, they go through tons of physical training. It’s like being a firefighter!”

H: “So, I’ll just ... I’ll get in shape! They’re trying to recruit women now, you know?”

E: “We’ll is that what you really want? To be the Black lesbian in the firehouse?”

H: “You know, you act like I’m gonna march in there with a rainbow flag. No one knows I’m a lesbian!”

E: “It’s just firehouses are boys’ clubs, Hen. And *white* boys’ clubs.

H: “Well, then I’ll just have to Rosa Parks the hell out of it, now, won’t I?”⁹³

The pair end the discussion with Eva pledging her support, a kiss, and an embrace. Then, we see a montage sequence of Hen working hard to make it through the Los Angeles Fire Academy, one scene of which is her setting fire to her wig and deciding to rock her signature buzz cut after the feminizing accessory falls off during a drill.

As soon as she walks into her first day at the firehouse, then-captain Gerrard and his two white lackies constantly belittle her, undermine her abilities, and force her to perform housekeeping work while on shift. Welcoming her by stating she’s “prettier than most” and introducing her to the rest of the house as “our new diversity hire,” he makes it clear that her presence is barely tolerated, let alone welcome. He is convinced that women cannot perform the job of keeping their team and the public safe. Chim, a Korean man and the only other person of color on her shift tries to show his solidarity, but Hen states curtly that she “doesn’t need anyone else carrying [her] load.” Later, her knowledge and ingenuity are what release a buried woman from a mudslide, but she receives no congratulations from her supervisor as he asserts the woman will die from her injuries anyway. At the same call, she meets Athena and the two connect.

Trying to comfort Hen, Chim attempts to relate to her through their shared minoritized racial identities. When she insists he doesn’t understand her situation, he asks “Oh, you think they’re inviting the Asian guy over to their houses for barbecues and out for beers?” She responds, “There’s a big difference between being invisible and being a threat to their way of life. And, yes, you’re a minority too, but you’re still a man. You benefit from a system that keeps women that look like me down.” This exchange is notable because, if only briefly, it calls out the model minority phenomenon in a way that *Grey’s*, for example, does not. In addition, it refers

explicitly to Hen's intersectional disadvantage due to her race and sex. As Chim temporarily gives up on trying to befriend her, he insists she talk to someone who can understand the challenges she is facing.

After another major run-in with her Captain, Hen meets Athena at a bar and is introduced to fellow "minority" public servants: Casey, a racially ambiguous gay firefighter, and Beth Ann, a white woman police officer. The group "swaps war stories," laughs, and drinks. Casey shares how being out made working with his team nearly impossible even though he was the strongest person on his team and his boyfriend encouraged him to "find a new dream," so he "found a new boyfriend" instead. Beth Ann shares that early in her career, a senior officer asked if she knew how to discharge her weapon despite her graduating from the academy at the top of her class. They lament how these "old-school" captains who "haven't kept up with the times" can make their work even more difficult than it already is. Athena shares that her first partner came onto her but she comically and assertively shut him down. They muse about how hard it must have been for the people that came before them. Athena encourages Hen to go in the next day, "outshine" her coworkers, and hold her head high because "they don't get to determine" who she is.

Doing so, she gives a big, impassioned monologue proclaiming her pride in her intersecting marginalized identities, demanding that they respect her as a fellow firefighter, and articulating her resolve to stay whether they like it or not. Her speech is punctuated by the alarm summoning them to a call where her keen observations, righteous defiance, and skill saves a child who would have otherwise been died, despite Captain Gerrard's refusal to listen to and respect her. Waiting on back up after their rogue heroics together, Hen and Chim cry tears of joy and relief. The next day, she is met with sincere congratulations from her previous white guy

bullies. She is called into a meeting with department officials and it is clear that fears she will be fired. Instead, she learns that several of her co-workers filed complaints about Gerrard's treatment of her and *he* has been fired. The episode ends with a scene of Hen responding to another emergency under a voiceover in which she affirms her purpose as a first responder.

Hen's episode arc in 2.9 offers quite a bit to unpack regarding the depiction of intersectional experience. First, Hen's dialogues with Eva, Chim, Athena, and the bar crew as well as her monologue articulate her own cognizance of the oppressive matrix she must navigate in order to pursue the job she wants. Moreover, those around her, especially Eva, also seem to exhibit at least some awareness of the effect her positionalities have on how she operates at work. This awareness is consequential because it recognizes the difficulty of Black women's lived experiences, unlike the purely assimilationist television that came before it and pretended as if race did not matter. Additionally, Hen's physical transformation throughout the episode, while it may seem trivial, is meaningful and offers another example of acculturative representation of Black femininity on the show. When we see her at dinner as a drug rep at the beginning of the episode, she is wearing heels, a tight dress, makeup, and a wig that present a traditionally feminine appearance and clearly draw the ogling eye of her customer. After her wig falls off at training once she is in the fire academy, she burns it. That sequence is funny, but it is also symbolic of her shirking expectations for feminine appearance and Eurocentric standards for Black beauty, helping her feel more comfortable doing the job she truly cares about in doing so.

In season 4, Hen starts medical school as the oldest person in her class at 40. Her lab partner Sydney, a young white woman half her age, is terrible to Hen from the time they meet. She belittles her profession, doubts her knowledge, and even tells Hen that she does not think she will make it all the way through the program. In episode 4.3, "Future Tense," they have a heart-

to-heart about their motives very entering medical school in the first place and Sydney reveals the true source of her obnoxious, overbearing ambition: she is threatened by Hen's years of medical experience and sees her as an obstacle to being at the top of their class.

Sydney: "I can't fail. You wouldn't understand."

Hen: "You think I wouldn't?!"

S: "You've been in the field for years! Practically doing the job, probably saved hundreds of lives already."

H: "I'm a Black lesbian that joined the fire department at 30, that started med school at 40. You think I've ever walked into a room and not had to prove that I *deserved* to be there?!"⁹⁴

Hen's response to Sydney's self-centered presumption illustrates a keen awareness of the matrix of domination under which she operates, intersecting forms of oppression that require her to justify her existence in and ability to contribute to the spaces she seeks to enter.

Ultimately, these sequences portray Hen as an optimal lifesaving professional, even in the face of blatant or passive racism and sexism. We see her encounter explicitly racist and sexist treatment by the person she is trying to save and her boss. She encounters metaphorical crap in the form of demeaning and dehumanizing language and literal crap as she tries to do her job. We watch Hen expertly and diligently perform her duties, skillfully saving and working under men who actively discriminated against her upon her arrival to each space. These plot points, while exaggerated for primetime television, illustrate the reality of Black women having to work within and for the same system that actively oppresses them. Black women nationwide face racist micro- and macro-aggressions at work, often without redress, and are still expected to perform the same duties to the same or a better standard than their non-minoritized counterparts in order

to maintain consistent, gainful employment. Briefly addressed in Hen and Eva's dialogue at the beginning of 2.9, this phenomenon has an additional layer of class implications; many Black American women cannot afford to leave a hostile work environment because they cannot afford to be without a job.

Although the arcs described above do a good job of demonstrating an understanding of intersectionality, they are not without issue. Hen is steadfastly committed to staying the course despite racist and sexist mistreatment at the hands of her colleague and supervisor, showing little doubt or desire to pursue a different, less hostile path. She is so committed to the project that she refuses to file an official complaint; her colleagues end up doing so for her. There is an odd tension at play here. On the one hand, Hen is portrayed as a strong and determined woman who withstands and overcomes oppression in order to help those around her. On the other hand, Hen is portrayed as a strong and determined woman who withstands and overcomes oppression in order to help those around her. While this portrayal succeeds in painting Hen as a hero, it also fails to model a Black woman indicting the institutional deficiencies the systems of which she is apart. This is best exemplified by Athena advising Hen to just stay the course and outwork the rest of her team instead of encouraging a different, more confrontational course of action.

This lack of oppositional, transformative perspective can be attributed to *9-1-1*'s generic conventions. Of course, Hen was going to stay and persevere against all odds. If she had not, she would not be on the show and there would be no Black, queer experience to chronicle. If any character occupying a minoritized identity had done anything other than stand strong and stay committed to their desire to help people, the show would only follow straight white men which, first of all, would be really boring and, secondly, would not perform well with contemporary audiences who expect to see at least an attempt at diversity in the television they consume. So,

insightful and challenging as Hen's intersectional arc may be, it is still bound by industry and audience expectations for the show as a whole.

Because *9-1-1* is housed on a broadcast network and belongs to a staple television genre, the representative risks it takes, while somewhat progressive, remain constrained by particular expectations for how an emergency procedural drama looks. For instance, the members of the main ensemble are going to be good at their jobs. Sure, they may encounter some roadblocks and break some rules, there may be a minor or temporary character who is not up to snuff and cannot stick around, but the main characters are designed for the audience get behind them, tuning in every week to watch them continue their journey or success because that is the expectation for the genre. Thus Hen, overall, is depicted as a lovable and determined firefighter/paramedic, mother, and wife who we, the audience, want to cheer for and come back to every week. She cannot be perfect; that would be boring. However, like all the other main ensemble members she must ultimately be *good*.

The generic requirement of overall narrative positivity and Hen's intersectional position could very well combine to result in the kind of simple, statically infallible, and inhumanly perfect characterization and dehumanization characteristic of many ethnically integrated dramatic ensembles. On other shows, it has. As the only Black woman in a house full of men, the fate of many an assimilated "Black best friend" could have easily befallen Hen: being called upon only to help and advise others, having no dynamic characterization or plot development outside of her non-Black peers, and acting as the steadfast moral compass of the group. She does offer frequent counsel to those around her, but she is just as often on the receiving end. Sure, she is extremely compassionate and has strong morals, but all of them do; they are firefighters, paramedics, and most of them are parents. The morality burden does not fall solely on Hen's

shoulders. In fact, she encounters temptation and fails to resist it almost as soon as we meet her, complicating the character by illustrating her fallible personhood. Instead of leaving her identities and experiences at the firehouse door and becoming “one of the guys” or a non-speaking repository for their emotional burdens, she is allowed space to process.

In the first season, as we are getting to know all the characters, the bulk of Hen’s storyline consists of her cheating on her wife with her drug-addict ex-girlfriend, Eva, and the resulting fallout. Returning after leaving her child for Hen to raise and years of estrangement punctuated by incarceration, Eva breezes back into Hen’s life unexpectedly. Initially reluctant and skeptical of Eva’s presence, Hen eventually succumbs to a moment of weakness and accepts her sexual advances, regretting it almost immediately afterward. Throughout the season, we watch Hen deal with the consequences of her actions including temporary separation from her wife and son, Karen and Denny, and Eva suing for custody of the son she gave up citing Hen’s infidelity as evidence of an “unstable home.” Hen is heartbroken and wallows for a bit before deciding to fight for her family. Eventually, true love prevails, the family reunites, Eva leaves town for good, and she is redeemed.

This early arc demonstrates a use of traditionally “negative” characterization to add complexity to Hen’s story. Infidelity is an unfortunate reality for many that is widely derided as an unethical relational practice, and having Hen be the perpetrator of it adds depth to her otherwise respectable character. For decades, respectability for Black media texts hinged on avoiding characterizations like being unfaithful that played into negative stereotypes of Black people. So, even though this part of Hen’s story has to have a happy resolution in order to adhere to established generic expectations, the inclusion of it illustrates an openness to depicting a

Black, queer woman as imperfect but still at the center of a greater narrative worth tuning in for each week.

Conclusion

The storylines analyzed here evaluate the chosen characters primarily through scenes and storylines where they do not interact substantially with one another. Their friendship, though, is not to be overlooked in examining the show's acculturative discursive strategy. Athena works alone and Hen with a house full of men, but they rely on and confide in each other in ways that allow them to fully be themselves, to be truly seen and understood by a person who shares their identity. Most, if not all, episodes have at least one scene that finds Hen and Athena alone, talking over coffee, lunch, or wine about their trials, triumphs, doubts, and feelings. In these scenes with two Black women on screen, we are reminded that identification with others who share experiences similar to ours, whether in real life or on screen, provides comfort for those who may struggle to find it.

Athena and Hen's jobs ask them to negotiate their identities as Black women with the masculine and historically white cultures and behaviors of their work places. Ultimately, they are both playing against a baseline whiteness that is built into the procedural professional genre, Athena individually and Hen in a collective. Unlike shows that have added a Black person or two to "race neutral" roles in an ensemble and called it diverse, *9-1-1* explores, to an extent, the ways that race, gender, and sexuality affect how Black women navigate a world where they are expected to perform a prescribed femininity under multiple oppressive forces. Even still, this recognition of their positionality is constrained by the demands of primetime commercial television, a set of rules that still ultimately requires the characters to assume the neoliberal

outlook of individual transcendence and optimization, even as they are literally employed by the institutions that have been weaponized to oppress them.

CHAPTER 2

FOR US, BY THE CW: INDUSTRIAL PLURALISM AND *ALL AMERICAN: HOMECOMING*

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have experienced a surge in mainstream cultural relevance in recent years. We can reasonably trace this trend to Beyoncé's groundbreaking 2018 Coachella performance and the subsequent Netflix concert film, *Homecoming* (2019). The performance and film featured a number of the most well-known aspects of the HBCU experience as a celebration of Black identity. In both, a marching band accompanies the singer with arrangements of her songs. Her dancers are dressed as and move like majorettes, apparently taking inspiration from the famously exclusive, mesmerizing Alabama State Stingettes and Southern University Dancing Dolls. Throughout the show, the choreography and musical arrangements make allusions to hallmark elements of many Black college experiences including stepping, the "Divine Nine" fraternities and sororities, and unmistakable Black national anthems like "Swag Surfin'" and "Down for My Niggaz." Perhaps the most recognizable clip of the performance, film, and promotional texts is Beyoncé's haunting belt of the *actual* Black National Anthem's first verse, which is followed immediately by the punchy introduction of "Formation" from her decidedly political 2016 album *Lemonade*.

The Queen's unapologetic celebration of HBCU culture and its definitive Blackness came in the wake of the nationwide surge in expressed anti-Black sentiments and documented anti-Black violence that accompanied the election of Donald Trump to the United States presidency. *Homecoming* is one of the most recent mainstream media products to laud the HBCU so directly and at such a magnitude. To name a few, *A Different World* (1987-1993) and, to a lesser degree, *Drumline* (2002), and *Stomp the Yard* (2007) were also relatively popular media that centered around student experiences at fictional historically Black

colleges/universities. For the most part, these texts portrayed HBCUs as meccas of Black excellence, cultural and educational havens for Black youth to be Black youth.

While a couple of films tackled representing these spaces and experiences after the turn of the century, television, unsurprisingly, did not. As discussed previously, there was a sharp decline in Black cast programming as the push for a neoliberal multiculturalism prioritizing universality precluded the specificity required to portray an HBCU, especially on broadcast television. Instead of “doling out difference” on many ethnically specific shows, ethnic difference was “recombined” to “more cost effectively showcase diversity” and maximize audience appeal.⁹⁵ In such an environment, HBCUs do not make the cut for racial representation efficiency. Rhimes-era television saw just one earnest attempt at chronicling HBCU life through the drama format: cable channel BET’s *The Quad* (2017-2018), a short lived series starring *Dreamgirls* and *The Princess and the Frog* actress Anika Noni Rose as the new president of fictional Georgia A&M University. *The Quad* was, as its short run might indicate, not popular and, speaking as a viewer who tried to like it, fine at best.

That is what makes the focus of this chapter such an interesting case to consider. The CW’s *All American: Homecoming* (AAH, 2022-) is a spin-off of the network’s popular (mostly) Black cast sports drama *All American* (AA, 2018-), both of which are headed by Black female showrunner Nkechi Okoro Carroll. That not just one, but two Black cast dramas have survived—thrived, even—on the same network that gave us beloved whiny white kid hits like *One Tree Hill* and *The Vampire Diaries* is a fascinating illustration of the channel’s evolution as driven by its unique industrial position. As the product of an alliance between two television production giants and a channel that has capitalized upon instead of trying to catch up with streaming platforms, The CW occupies a space unlike any other broadcast network which, in turn, has provided space

for niche, experimental, and/or “risky” content such as the Black cast drama. In this chapter, I argue that *All American: Homecoming*’s development and presence on broadcast indicates the culmination of a broader representation strategy: an industrial pluralism that finds Black women showrunners responsible for repackaging traditionally white television paradigms in Black cast stories on an expanding range of platforms. I will first walk through The CW’s unique history and industrial position before examining their influence in creating a space for an HBCU-set young adult drama. Then, I detail my application of Gray’s concept of pluralism to the case and argument at hand, updating its function for the contemporary context.

The Fifth Network

Much like the characters in the stories it showcases, the CW has an intricate and troublesome past which begins about a decade before the formation of the channel as we know it today. Television historian Michele Hilmes notes that the mid-1980s through mid-1990s saw “an ever-expanding universe of networks, channels, programs, niches, and audience segments,” effectively fragmenting national attention.⁹⁶ Economically, synergy was the name of the game, as corporations sought to integrate not only vertically within industries, but horizontally across sectors as well. Politically, Reagan-era deregulation spurred that behavior, engendering a breeding ground for new competitive practices. Importantly, the cable market expanded and became accessible to more users. In addition, longstanding fin/syn and PTAR rules expired, allowing networks to produce their own programs and retain residual rights.

Previously dominated by “the Big Three” networks (NBC, CBS, and ABC), the broadcast television landscape now offered audiences more choices for viewing than ever and advertisers worked to follow their attention to these new, specialized televisual sites. In addition to Fox, whose history I explored in the introduction, two new sites born in this decade were the CBS

Corporation's United Paramount Network (UPN), and Warner Bros.' The WB. From early on, UPN seemed to be picking up Fox's slack and its Black viewership after it made its "mainstream" turn in 1994. The nascent network would prove to be a prolific producer of Black sitcoms, establishing a reputation for Black-led programming, with The WB housing a few similar shows. The two "netlets," both debuting in January 1995, would eventually merge about a decade later to form the network at hand.⁹⁷

Like Fox, UPN and The WB cut their teeth on Black programming before moving on to whiter, more mainstream/lucrative pastures. After its upstart, Fox gave a home to Black led and cast shows that drew large amounts of Black and Brown viewers, the exact "urban" market they were targeting. Keenen Ivory Wayans' *In Living Color*, Yvette Lee Bowser's *Living Single*, and Martin Lawrence's *Martin* all leveraged Black experiences and vernacular to create the kind of "edgy" content the Big Three avoided, thereby attracting the audiences they could not satisfy. The WB and UPN followed similar trajectories early in their existence.

A substantial part of The WB's earliest programming was Black sitcoms, with *The Parent 'Hood*; *Sister, Sister*; and *The Wayans Bros.* all running from 1995 to 1999. The nascent network also commissioned *The Jamie Foxx Show*, *The Steve Harvey Show*, and *Smart Guy* in its first years on air. For a while, these half-hour sitcoms ran alongside (kind of) white dramas like *7th Heaven*, *Charmed*, *Dawson's Creek*, and *Felicity*. At the turn of the century though, even sitcoms—the long-time staple genre for Black representation on television—ceased to be a haven for Black casts and creators on the network. After 2000, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Reba*, and *What I Like About You* took up sitcom space that had belonged to the aforementioned Black programs. The network's white drama fare gained airtime as Black sitcoms lost it, with *Gilmore Girls* and *Smallville* premiering after the century's turn.

To put it plainly, relative to The WB, UPN was Blacker and sustained that Blackness for longer. Among the network's first and most famous original Black cast sitcoms is *Moesha* which was followed by spin-off *The Parkers* and *Girlfriends*, *One on One*, *Half & Half*, *Eve*, *All of Us*, and *Everybody Hates Chris*. That is not an exhaustive list of Black sitcoms housed on UPN, but one that includes the shows that were particularly successful and/or saw a second life through syndication on cable channels geared toward Black viewers after their original run. Unlike The WB, white dramas, though present, did not dominate UPN's slate of original programming. The most notable of these were *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Roswell*, and *Veronica Mars*.

Across American broadcast television history, sitcoms have been the most frequent sites for Black representation; the mid-1980s through early 2000s saw a particular abundance of these programs across networks, with many creators innovating within the genre to allow for distinct expressions of cultural Blackness. These Black story worlds moved beyond assimilation, with some pluralist texts putting Black characters into normatively white roles and other multiculturalist texts exploring the nuances of varied Black experiences. In this case study's history, these precedents for Black feminine representation matter precisely because they were neglected for the first 12 years of The CW's history and, even after their recent shift in racial representation priorities, have yet to be embraced as fully as they were in the shows below. *Moesha* and *One on One* are particularly relevant because they set an influential standard for the development of culturally specific Black female characters on teen- and young adult-facing television.

Moesha premiered on the nascent UPN in 1996 boasting R&B starlet Brandy as the titular character, a teen living in Leimert Park in South Central Los Angeles. The multi-cam sitcom followed *Moesha* and her friends as they navigated life as Black youths. *Moesha* was

created by Ralph Farquhar, Sara V. Finney, and Vida Spears, a team of established Black television writers and producers. The entire main cast and the majority of the writing staff were Black, as was the world in which the show was set, with Black and Brown extras filling the hallways of Crenshaw High School, the tables and seats at café/hangout The Den, and various other spots that Moesha and crew frequented. From the outset, it was clear that *Moesha* was decisively by and for Black people, from the cast to the setting to the vernacular of the dialogue to the soulful (and synth-heavy) score to the plethora of cameos and guest roles by established and rising Black cultural icons like Gabrielle Union, Johnny Gill, and Usher. Across the show's five year run, its stories tackled a handful of tough issues including unplanned pregnancy, body image, race relations, and other themes with which Black youth could identify. It did so, though, within a relatively homogeneous ensemble of main characters; most of the exploration of these issues took place through guest or infrequently recurrent roles. The main characters' backgrounds varied minimally and was evidenced mostly through discussion of single parents and allusions to economic status, sometimes in relation to Moesha's dual-parent, dual-income, solidly middle class household. As such, *Moesha* fits firmly within Gray's pluralist paradigm, as does the following program for similar reasons.

Following in *Moesha*'s footsteps but set on the opposite coast was *One on One*, also housed on UPN. Also a multi-cam sitcom, it followed ex-NBA player, sports anchor, and play boy Flex Washington (Flex Alexander) after he unexpectedly becomes the primary guardian of his teenage daughter Breanna, the product of a teen pregnancy and subsequent marriage and divorce. Played by Kyla Pratt, Breanna is precocious, boy-crazy, and curious, a combination that often lands her and her best friends in trouble. Like *Moesha*, the show was clearly specific to Black life and culture as evidenced by its setting in Baltimore, how the characters speak, cultural

references, theme song and score, and cameos/guest stars. Additionally, Black viewers would likely recognize several cast members from other Black texts. Kyla Pratt had had memorable roles and performances on the 1998 *Dr. Dolittle* starring Eddie Murphy and cult classic sports drama *Love and Basketball* (2000). Flex's best friend and the series' jester was played by Kelly Perine, who had acted on sitcoms *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper* and *The Parent 'Hood*. Breanna's mother, a recurring character, was played by Tichina Arnold, of *Martin* fame. Not only was *One on One* a Black sitcom that, like many of its predecessors, leaned in to the cultural hallmarks of Black America, it also utilized familiar faces from those same shows.

Alas, *One on One*'s story ends much like the narrative arc of the series itself—poorly. As mentioned above, UPN and The WB merged in 2005 and The CW network premiered in 2006, bringing with it a 1994 Fox-reminiscent change in programming. The deal and the new platform it produced was born in the wake of the “merger mania” that followed the landmark Telecommunications Act of 1996 which undergirded “an enormous scramble to acquire new media properties.”⁹⁸ The aforementioned parent companies agreed to merge their upstart UPN and The WB networks. The WB had gained notoriety for its union of “youthful adventures with verbal and narrative sophistication” in advancing the youthful bias of the day's television while also attracting older viewers.⁹⁹ The vast majority of these youth were white, with minority programs and viewership largely directed to UPN which, by 1999, was the top network among Black American households. However, when the two networks merged in the mid-2000s, The WB's established commercial interests and conventions won out and meaningfully diverse, ethnically specific network sitcoms and dramas nearly went extinct on the very broadcast networks that relied on the viewership they drew. Early in its existence, the CW did continue to produce and air UPN carry-over *Girlfriends* and its spin-off *The Game*, both featuring Black

producers and casts, but began to establish its reputation for catering primarily to a white youth audience.

Like *Moesha* and *One on One*, *Girlfriends* and *The Game* constructed definitively ethnic, specifically Black American characters and stories. Both were headed by Mara Brock Akil, who had written on *Moesha* for most of its run and will return in a pivotal piece of this timeline later. *Girlfriends* followed a group of Black 20-something women (and their one male friend) in Los Angeles who differ greatly in personality, profession, and outlook, but were close friends nonetheless. The main ensemble starred Tracee Ellis Ross as Joan, a neurotic attorney; Golden Brooks as Maya, her former assistant and a young mother from Compton; Jill Marie Jones as Toni, Joan's friend from her childhood in Fresno and a quick-witted, high-maintenance, pretentious real-estate agent; and Persia White as Lynn, a biracial, bohemian career grad student who was adopted and raised by a white family and did not embrace her Blackness until college. This collection of differing origins and experiences among this group of women resulted in witty dialogue, comical misunderstandings, clashes of perspective and, almost always, the celebration of Black feminine identity, solidarity, and friendship. Thus, *Girlfriends* and its spin-off articulate the multiculturalist discourse of televisual Blackness Gray underscores as ideal, illustrating a movement beyond the pluralist, domestic-set sitcoms that dominated the genre previously.

Spinning off of *Girlfriends* in a 2006 backdoor pilot, *The Game*, for its run on The CW, was a different iteration of the sitcom. It followed professional footballers for the fictional San Diego Sabers and their families/romantic partners. For the first five seasons, it focused on Tia Mowry's Melanie Barnett, girlfriend of San Diego Sabers rookie Derwin Davis who gave up her dream of becoming a doctor to support her boyfriend. In addition to Melanie, two other women rounded out the female half of the six-person main ensemble. Wendy Raquel Robinson, who

many Black viewers would recognize from *The Steve Harvey Show*, played Tasha Mack, the bold and brash mom-ager of young Sabers star Malik. Finally, Kelly Pitts, the only white member of the ensemble and one half of an interracial marriage, was played by Brittany Daniel. The assembly of these three characters, specifically, made for a lot of contrast-based comedy between Melanie's buttoned-up, wide-eyed newness; Tasha's loud, direct, and deeply African American vernacular-rooted commentary; and Kelly's perpetual optimism, ditziness, and white ignorance. The series was eventually canceled by The CW in 2009 before being revived and revamped as a more dramatic program by BET from 2011 to 2015 and again by Paramount+ in 2021, still partly under Mara Brock Akil's leadership.

While they hung on for a while, *Girlfriends* and *The Game* were ultimately too specific—that is, too Black—to fit either The CW's early goals or the larger trajectory of racial representation on network television at large, objectives that prioritized neutralizing difference, limiting it to visual presence only, to advance the postracial myth while hanging onto as many viewers as possible. Black casts talking about their Black lives in Black vernacular? That certainly did not fit the Rhimes-era program of efficient, economized diversity on broadcast television. The CW's original chosen audience had started taking shape long before the merger, with The WB's hit *Dawson's Creek* making waves among the network's first successful teen soaps. The show was often lauded as “quality” because of the “heightened vocabulary of its main characters, adult-like content, and class consciousness.”¹⁰⁰ The exclusively white cast and small-town setting provided the model for successors *Roswell* and *One Tree Hill*. Shortly after its premiere, The CW sought to emulate the success of those shows for itself, releasing *Gossip Girl* in 2007. *Gossip Girl* was an adaptation of a “popular YA novel series, which involved a more

sexually mature and salacious teen lifestyle” and “tapped into an established fanbase” of white teenaged girls.¹⁰¹

While it was generally popular among audiences at the time, *Gossip Girl* drew backlash for its unprecedented edginess by broadcast network standards. The Parents Television Council and others decried the series as “hedonistic” for its lack of moral and ethical lessons and embrace of characters’ moral ambiguity, unlike its network era predecessors. Critics lamented abundant sex, drugs, and other more adult themes. The network successfully appropriated these critiques for the show’s marketing campaign. *Gossip Girl* and its success set a storytelling precedent for The CW that many of its programs since have followed: a narrative affinity for serial, soapy prime time drama portrayed with large and largely white ensemble casts. The shows that would follow in this paradigm were not completely devoid of people of color, although they came close. The raced bodies that filled these roles, however, were subject to the “race neutral” assimilationist writing discussed previously. Gone were the identifiably ethnic, undeniably Black, and culturally reflective Tasha from Richmond, Maya from Compton, Breanna from Baltimore, or Moesha from Leimert Park.

For the majority of *Gossip Girl*’s run, the only person of color in the main ensemble was Jessica Szohr’s Vanessa Abrams. As an outsider to the Upper East Side, her class is addressed but never her race. Unlike the characters of color in the drama series that followed, Szohr/Vanessa is perplexingly racially ambiguous. Vanessa does not present as belonging definitively to an ethnicity, nor does she articulate culturally specific ties to any racially marginalized group. Her clear non-whiteness was otherwise difficult to tie to a particular race or culture, essentially serving to only “diversify” the cast nominally. The only other character of color to appear significantly on the show was Tika Sumpter’s Raina Thorpe, who had a recurring

role in season four as the business savvy daughter of a formerly exiled Upper East Side mogul. Unlike Szohr, Sumpter is a dark-skinned Black woman, so Raina's race is obvious. However, the character is written as normatively white, with no mention of her race during her season-long arc.

This avoidant strategy, Obama- and Rhimes-era colorblindness, set the tone for racial representation on The CW's dramas. In fact, mildly and insidiously racist roles became the standard for including Black and Brown people on its dramas. For instance, Beverly Hills-set *90210* has a Black character adopted by a white family and a Pakistani character portrayed by an Ecuadorian actor, both of whom received minimal racially specific character development. Briefly addressed in this project's introduction, *The Vampire Diaries*'s Bonnie Bennett (Kat Graham) was a Black witch in Virginia whose ancestors, going back centuries, were also Black witches in Virginia. Nevertheless, her race; their race; and the historical, political, and social implications of their presence in the South are, at best, ignored and, at worst, actively denied. *TVD*'s other ensemble member of color, Michael Trevino's Tyler Lockwood, received similar treatment. Trevino is Mexican-American, Tyler's race is never addressed although there are vague allusions to Indigenous ancestry, and both of the character's parents are white. These characters were visibly non-white but discursively divorced from the realities of those identities by the refusal to truly recognize the histories and experiences they carry.

Until 2018, The CW's track record for robust representation of racially minoritized identities was somewhere between abysmal and bad. Premiering 15 years after the network's first original series, *All American: Homecoming*, like its parent show, is the result of putting Black casts into the teen/young adult drama formula perfected by white creators and on casts of unattainably attractive, mostly white (and some white-written) people. It adopts all those

melodramatic, edgy, ensemble-driven storytelling traditions, but does so with an entirely Black main cast in a necessarily Black setting. Although that seems progressive and worth celebration at first glance, it is indicative of The CW's turn to industrial pluralism as its most recent strategy for representing Blackness.

The Netflix Effect: Guaranteed Streams Shift Priorities

So, how did we get from *Gossip Girl*'s posh, privileged, white Upper West Side to *All American: Homecoming*'s Brington University in Atlanta, America's Blackest metropolitan area? The journey is fascinating and has as much to do with Netflix as it does The CW and the broader sociocultural context. In a groundbreaking 2011 deal valued at one billion dollars, Netflix secured the rights to stream the network's scripted content for four years, including previous seasons of current shows and those shows' new episodes after their first-run broadcasts. Canceled shows made it to Hulu, another influential streamer. With the onset of this agreement, "The CW's new business strategy necessitated owning as much of its programming as possible."¹⁰² Four years later, "programming owned in whole or in part by one (or both) of the network's parent companies made up 100% of the prime-time schedule."¹⁰³ This arrangement was a boon for the network's parents, CBS Corporation and Warner Bros. Television (WBTV). The network pays to air CBS Television Studios (CTS), WBTV, or CTS/WBTV productions, sells commercial time to advertisers seeking target audiences, and generates revenue through streamer licensing deals. CBS Corp. and Warner Bros. profits doubly. The niche nature of the channel's shows only fortifies their profitability to all involved.

After the streaming deals and former CW CEO Mark Pedowitz's takeover in 2011, The CW established a track record of keeping shows that, by typical broadcast standards, are ratings failures. For example, *Jane the Virgin* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* are both shows that consistently

drew far less than one million viewers. For any of the Big Four networks, those numbers would result in swift cancellation. However, The CW sustained the shows because they achieved an unusual level of critical acclaim early in their tenure, a reputation for “consistent quality,” and a “small but loyal fanbase.”¹⁰⁴ Because “The CW specializes in hour-long programs with continuing narratives that develop small but loyal audiences,” its “programming profile coincides neatly with the audience profile and viewing practices of Netflix users.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, CW shows are inherently binge-able, so it makes sense that Netflix would shell out quite a bit to draw fans wanting to rewatch entire seasons or series to the service. In this arrangement, Netflix benefits from the streaming numbers it gains from its large catalog of this type of content while The CW, CBS Corp., and WBTV benefit from the hefty licensing fees and increased visibility.

The CW’s lucrative deal with Netflix was an incentive to make a lot of content that reached smaller segments of the broadcast television audience; even if series did not perform optimally on their first run, committed fans would stream it. In the wake of this profitability, The CW began taking more “risks” not only on shows with outlandish premises, but also on POC-led shows that featured and/or were created/run by non-white people. Among the first of these “risky” moves was the television adaptation of DC Comics’ *Black Lightning*. The executive producers at the helm of this project were Salim Akil and wife/producing partner, aforementioned creator of The CW’s last Black cast strongholds, Mara Brock Akil. The fifth installment in “The Arrowverse,” The CW’s slate of DC focused shows, *Black Lightning* was by far the Blackest of these shows in terms of leadership, casting, and narrative.

Black Lightning starred Cress Williams as Jefferson Pierce, the devoted principal of at-risk Freeland High School, doting father to two also super-powered daughters, and the titular vigilante superhero, his mostly-secret alter ego. The story is set in fictional Freeland, Georgia

which could not be more different from the Star (*Arrow*), Central (*The Flash*), and National Cities (*Supergirl*) where the other Arrowverse shows take place. Freeland is clearly a proxy for a metro-Atlanta community, as evidenced by the nearly exclusively Black makeup of the cast and extras, which is particularly visible in scenes set at the school or on the streets of the city. In addition to the demographics of the setting, *Black Lightning* also stood apart from its Arrowverse predecessors by adopting a notably more political tone across all four seasons; the plot's premise is a transparent allusion to the maltreatment, injustices, and resulting tragic outcomes plaguing real Black communities across the United States.

To provide an example, the premise of the first season is that Jefferson must return as Black Lightning after a nine-year hiatus to protect his family and other Freeland citizens from The 100, the city's most villainous gang. In addition to trafficking humans, The 100 also deals in Green Light, a deadly drug that is making a resurgence on the streets of the town after it was originally planted there on purpose by fictional government agency the A.S.A. during Jefferson's childhood. Eventually, we learn that planting Green Light in Freeland was a A.S.A. experiment to create meta-humans (super-humans) that could be used to enhance military defense operations and that Jefferson's powers—and his daughters'—are a direct result of his exposure all those years ago. This is an obvious allusion to the real-life crack epidemic that devastated many Black communities in the 1980s through early 1990s, and whose onset is widely attributed to the racist agenda of the United States government. Of course, this is still an Arrowverse show, so instead of widespread addiction, millions of senseless deaths, and mass incarceration, the Greenlight victims in the show... develop superhuman abilities.

Black Lightning's premise is significant because the sociohistorical foundation of its content and the real-world relevance of its subject matter is quite the departure from not only its

Arrowverse predecessors, but every other hour-long primetime drama The CW ever made. *Black Lightning* exemplifies one version of industrial pluralism. In its case, it took up a Black story, but only on the terms of the lucrative, larger, whiter DC franchise universe. It was an experiment for the network, one whose success paved the way for the next “risky” step of a Black teen drama run by a Black woman, one that was made viable by a confluence of three unique and powerful factors. First, as discussed at the beginning of this section, The CW was approaching peak profitability, exploiting its one-of-a-kind industrial position to squeeze all the viewership (and money) it could out of its loyal, niche consumer base. Second, the some of the cable channels after which the network modeled its programming practices were taking big swings on Black woman-led, Black cast shows. For instance, Issa Rae’s *Insecure* had been making waves at HBO for over a year and Lena Waithe’s *The Chi* was set to premier just days before *Black Lightning*. Finally, in a post-Obama, early Trump administration and the rising tide of the Black Lives Matter movement, The CW needed to do *something* that illustrated some sort of social consciousness so that it could present itself as a network that was “down” and “got” young people. Taking into consideration its financial stability, the diversifying industrial environment, and an explosive sociopolitical environment, the network took the leap on changing its mode of Black representation and employing a Black woman to do so, but within the safety of its well-established superhero tradition.

‘...we *are* all American...’: Industrial Pluralism, Black Representation, and the CW

Formula

After dispensing with all of the Black programming it inherited from UPN and The WB, founding its reputation on predominantly or exclusively white dramas, and exploiting a groundbreaking streaming deal to bolster the performance of its niche content, The CW signaled

a reorientation to racial representation with the rollout of *Black Lightning*. Nine months later, among a slate of other new shows starring or produced by people of color, Black cast sports drama *All American* (AA) premiered, also carrying a more political, socially aware tone, but once again centering a teen-focused ensemble like CW series of the past. Unlike the series of the past, it was the network's first Black cast, non-superhero drama. South Central Los Angeles native Spencer James (Daniel Ezra) moves into the Beverly Hills home of South Crenshaw legend turned professional player turned coach Billy Baker (Taye Diggs), so that he can play football for him at Beverly High, a mutually beneficial arrangement for the struggling team and NFL hopeful Spencer. Throughout the first few seasons of the series, Spencer must manage the demands of his new life as a Beverly Hills student-athlete while staying true to his South Crenshaw roots. There are three white secondary characters on AA, the rest of the large ensemble present different kinds of Blackness that yield differences in experience and outlook. On the one hand, there is Spencer's best friend from South Crenshaw, Coop (Bre-Z), a lesbian who is drawn into gang activity after being kicked out of her home because of her sexuality. On the other hand, Spencer's first Beverly love interest, Layla (Greta Onieogou), is the daughter of a widowed, wealthy but absent record producer who lives alone in a giant mansion. Also in the mix are the Baker twins, Jordan and Olivia (Michael Evans Behling and Samantha Logan), Billy's biracial children who help Spencer acclimate to his new home. When we meet them, Jordan is the Beverly quarterback, striving for his father's approval and Olivia is a recovering addict who is still a social pariah after returning from rehab. Like *Gossip Girl* or *90210*, the narrative is driven by pretty "teens" and their unrealistic problem. This time, though, the "teens" are Black.

The series' spin-off and inspiration for this chapter takes representing the breadth of Black experience a step further by situating it within the HBCU setting and making the primary

protagonist a Black woman. It brings characters that share a common ethnic and cultural identity together while also highlighting their differences as they face the trials and triumphs of young adult life. Geffri Maya's Simone is *AAH*'s female lead and the primary link connecting it to *All American*.

A Beverly Hills native and daughter of affluent parents, we meet her because she leads Jordan (Spencer's best friend) to believe that he is the father of the child she is carrying. This revelation, however, proves to be false after she eventually admits that he is not the father. The two spark a relationship anyway, planning to raise the child together and going so far as getting "married" in Las Vegas before the child's birth. Ultimately, Simone decides to give the child up for adoption and pursue her dreams of playing college tennis. Episode 3.17 is a backdoor pilot that sees Simone, Jordan, Spencer, and Olivia (Spencer's love interest) visit Bringston to experience the school's famed homecoming weekend and visit Simone's aunt and journalism professor Amara (Kelly Jenrette). From the first scene of the episode, it is aggressively underscored that Bringston *is not* like Beverly Hills and *is* very, very Black. As the wide-eyed bunch walks across the campus in the first six minutes of the episode, they are entranced by rapper Cordae's performance for BU students; "Madame VP," "Ms. Stacey Nobel Peace Prize-nominee Abrams," and Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms are enthusiastically name dropped as HBCU grads; V.I.C.'s "Wobble" moves a couple of members of the party to join in the eponymous line dance; and Simone is urged to "give into the fun of a beau-ti-fully melanated HBCU experience."¹⁰⁶ As the episode progresses, Simone makes fast friends with some current students, meets one of her future *AAH* love interests, and revels in the spirit of the historically Black university. Before she leaves, in a heart-to-heart with her aunt, Simone remarks, "It's amazing to be in a place that's *for* us, *by* us, where excellence is *expected*."¹⁰⁷ By the end of the

episode, she has decided to attend Bringston and try making the tennis team as a walk-on, despite her reservations about moving across the country and her mother's certain disapproval of the decision.

Black women lead *All American: Homecoming* both in front of and behind the camera. Geffri Maya's Simone is the lead character and the impetus for exploring HBCU experiences through Bringston and the show's all Black ensemble. One half of the main cast is women in addition to one feminine-presenting non-binary character. Additionally, the AA universe's showrunner is Nkechi Okoro Carroll, a Nigerian American woman who began her television writing career on Fox's *Bones* spin off *The Finder* before writing for the former and eventually co-executive producing on *Rosewood* and *The Resident*. In talking about her current projects, she has made her mission in telling these stories clear and emphasized that she wants to draw on real-life experiences to help them feel authentic.

On the subject of the show's representations of Blackness and her objectives as showrunner she told an interviewer:

What I love about it is that it is a diverse look at Black youth in America. And by diverse, I don't mean the fact that they're Black, I mean all the different types and shapes and forms of Blackness that are represented on the show... Because we're not a monolith. I love that we get to experience this world through all these different [types] of Black youth on the show.¹⁰⁸

Across the AA shows' tenures, Carroll has guided the programs' approach to telling stories that range from addiction to gun violence to social justice activism and protest by Black Americans. She sees tackling these "tough" issues as a necessity for telling good and relatable stories even in the heightened reality of the primetime drama:

And so for me as a writer, it's always very important that there's a level — a baseline — of authenticity in the shows we're doing. We're a show with great aspirational qualities because Spencer [Paysinger]'s life is so inspirational and something a lot of people aspire to, and that's always going to be the underbelly of our show. But absolutely, you can't tell these kinds of stories in a true, authentic way unless you're delving into some of [the social and structural issues that affect Black individuals and communities].¹⁰⁹

In striving for the authenticity Carroll highlights above, the *AA* universe centers experiences and invites consideration of difference in a way that, until 2018, had not been present on *The CW* since its launch.

For instance, *AAH*'s first season sees Simone's tennis teammate and frenemy Thea (Camille Hyde) become a victim of sexual assault and deal with the emotional aftermath of the traumatic event. Recurrent across both seasons is Nate's (Rhoyale Ivy King, Simone's non-binary roommate) encounters with queerphobia from a closed-minded peer. In episode 2.4, a white supremacist bomb threat puts Brington under lockdown and wreaks emotional havoc on the campus community. Subsequently, in episode 2.5, university administration organizes a "Black Joy Day" on which class is cancelled and students are encouraged to take care of themselves by having fun and connecting with mental health professionals who can help them process the event. So far, season two has also tackled slut shaming and fraternity hazing as well. In these examples, it is clear that Carroll cares about depicting varied experiences that recognize some of the challenges Black youth may face.

That is not to say that *All American: Homecoming* is a perfect example of Black representation on broadcast television. It is not. On the surface, it may seem like *AAH* is a

paragon of pure, unbridled ethnic specificity on a network that has historically lacked it.

However, it is still a young adult drama on a commercial network that has built its existence around that very format. The statement *AAH* makes by presenting ubiquitous, varied Blackness is certainly worth appreciating, but it is still guided by the constraints of a genre perfected by, for, and on whiteness.

Creative employment of Gray's conception of pluralism frames the issue at the heart of this case study. He defines pluralist or "separate-but-equal" televisual discourses as those that "situate black characters in domestically centered black worlds and circumstances that essentially parallel those of whites," allowing the celebration of marginalized people and the "positions they represent without disrupting and challenging the dominant narratives about American society."¹¹⁰ Essentially, according to Gray, pluralist texts copy and paste storytelling modes constructed by and for white people onto homogeneous groups of Black characters and makes minor adjustments so that these stories make sense, minimizing the nuance of Black experience and the "social and historical contexts in which these acknowledged differences are expressed, sustained, and meaningful" in the process.¹¹¹ Gray writes:

...their presence on commercial network television symbolically confirms the legitimacy and effectiveness of the very cultural pluralism on which America's official construction and representation of itself depend. Obscured in the process is the impact (and responses to it) of structured social inequality and the social hierarchies that are structured by it.

As such, pluralist discourses "are tethered to [the] hegemonic white middle-class universe...through conventional formulas, genres, codes, and practices that structure their representations."¹¹²

Broadcast shows could not survive on television today if they were based in the sort of “homogeneous, totalizing,” monolithic depiction of Blackness that Gray identifies and derides above. To do so would require a complete lack of contemporary sociocultural consciousness that is simply not profitable for networks to display. That is not to say that pluralism has ceased to exist. Rather, it is present in more insidious ways than on, say, *The Cosby Show* or *Family Matters* which was, effectively, Black *Full House*. We must look, then, beyond just television texts themselves to the industrial environments that produce them in order to recognize how pluralism is still at work. Regarding Black women in and on broadcast television, industrial pluralism manifests as the appointment of Black women to leadership on shows with predominantly Black casts that otherwise deviate very little from established conventions of storytelling that are derived from hegemonic values and ideologies. It is the Black woman led repackaging—not transgression or subversion, as platforms may herald—of white televisual paradigms in Black casts.

One sneaky way that industrial pluralism is at work in the AA universe is the shows’ premises necessitating a much greater degree of Black representation than CW dramas of old. It would be weird if a story set partly in South Central Los Angeles had a bunch of white people in it. It would be even weirder if the South Central native responsible for Spencer’s transfer were white, so he is Black and his children are mixed race. Likewise, a story set at an HBCU would be remarkably less believable and incredibly problematic if it centered as many white people as *Gossip Girl* or *90210* or *The Vampire Diaries*. Even so, the format in use on *AAH* and its parent show was perfected on those shows and, on a narrative level, is virtually the same.

Additionally, the AA stories are rooted in hegemonic notions of middle to upper class success and acceptability which the television industry has historically coded as white. The

reason *All American* exists is that Spencer Paysinger “made it” out of Crenshaw to the NFL by transferring to a whiter, richer school that afforded him more visibility and opportunities for recruitment; the show tells that story. *All American: Homecoming* centers the pursuit of the collegiate experience, the credentials of which are basically a requirement—but not a guarantee—for existing in the American middle class today, usually at immense, debt-accruing cost. Moreover, the “Black excellence” that Simone references and on which real life HBCUs stake their reputations is tied to respectability politics, a manifestation of internalized racism. The Blackness of the university at which it is set does nothing to interrogate those realities.

Finally, two ideas articulated by showrunner Nkechi Okoro Carroll illustrate the pluralist imperatives driving the narratives on the shows she runs, even more so than the content of the shows themselves.

One of the things that The CW and WB do really well is tell the “teen drama” in a multitude of different ways. For starters, I think *All American* is one of the most inclusive shows on the network across the board, not just in terms of race, but in terms of sexual identity. I also think it’s a relatable story in that, even though it’s about a young boy from South Central who moves to Beverly Hills, it’s relatable for anyone who has a dream and wants to use the talents that they’ve been given for good. I think it’ll help remind people that on a cellular level, we’re not really that different, and sometimes we just need to be reminded of that.¹¹³

Three things stand out in the above quote. First, Carroll explicitly references the paradigm off of which the *AA* universe is modeled, one problematized earlier in this chapter. Second, she references a “doubling down” on difference that is reminiscent of the efficiency-oriented representation strategies of assimilation/neoliberal “multiculturalism,” as she is referencing *AA*’s

two lesbian characters who are 1) both Black and 2) in a relationship with each other. Third, the sentiment that “we’re really not that different” smacks of universality and post-racial unity discourses that absolve people and institutions of performing solidarity across difference by minimizing it.

In the spirit of recognizing pluralism at work on the industrial/creative side of television, another of Carroll’s comments is worth unpacking:

[Naming the shows *All American* and *All American: Homecoming* and having almost exclusively Black casts] was not a coincidence. It’s all intentional, because we *are* all American. It’s a pursuit of excellence. You know, that term is used in sports when you’ve achieved such a high level of excellence in whatever area you’re in. And for us, that title translates to achieving excellence in life, not just the sports that we’re pursuing on both shows... We should be dreaming, kids who look like us should be dreaming and *that’s* what *All American* stands for: being an American and contributing to this country, and the great dreams and goals and aspiration. It all applies to us and that’s what we want people to feel from both shows.¹¹⁴

So, Americanness is the “pursuit of excellence” and contribution to the American project in service of achieving the success that is lauded as meaningful by the same institutions that historically deny people of color access to pursue the very goals they set? If that is not hegemony being repackaged in Black casts, what is? This quote almost directly articulates Gray’s definition of pluralism as the placement of hegemonic ideologies of success and acceptability on Black worlds, but does so in a way that spins that imperative positively. At face value, that positivity seems misguided, but it may be that the ability to tell Black stories on contemporary network

television is contingent upon constructing these narratives in a way that functions to parallel these televisual worlds with our own in the very way that Gray derides.

Interestingly enough, Carroll is not *AA*'s creator nor was she the intended showrunner. She took over the reins from April Blair, a white CW veteran. A white woman was meant to run partially South Crenshaw-set, majority Black-cast *All American*. Not Carroll, though she was tied to the project early on. I do not mean to insinuate that Blair could not have made *AA* a successful text because she is white. I point this out because it is a blatant, interesting, possibly concerning manifestation of industrial pluralism as I have defined it. Having a track record for young adult drama success, The CW greenlit Blair's project despite her racial disparity with the program's premise. Carroll's placement at the helm was not as purposeful as it might seem:

I was assigned to the show as part of my overall deal here at Warner Bros., and it was a show I wanted to work on once I read the pilot script, because I was just so moved by it. As the mother of two black boys, I want to see this show on television... We've got an amazing creative team here, and we look forward to continuing to tell these stories that I think haven't really been told on network TV.¹¹⁵

"I was assigned" and "wanted to work on" are the operative phrases here, but that is not part of the public story that The CW has crafted for the *AA* universe with Carroll as visionary. Her passive voice points to the structural forces, the industrial pluralism, that influence her position. This revelation begs the question: Would *AAH* even exist if Blair had remained as showrunner of the parent program? I am skeptical that that would be the case.

Conclusion

If *All American: Homecoming* looked like *Insecure* or *The Chi*, it could not exist on broadcast television. At the same time, if it looked too much like *Gossip Girl* or *90210*, it could not survive in a contemporary broadcast environment responding to demographic shifts in viewership and an industry in flux. *AAH* illustrates The CW's response to this tension. The show is at once a departure from the network's past dramas in its abundant, diverse yet culturally specific Blackness and a thinly veiled reproduction of a formula predicated on whiteness. Tracking an industrial/sociocultural trend, emboldened by distinct profitability, The CW deployed an industrial pluralist strategy. Instead of producing texts that obviously reflected the "separate-but-equal" pluralism of a bygone era, the network gave a Black woman resources to make a Black show, but one constrained by its reliance on network conventions and advertiser funding. The CW's newfound affinity for diversity and range is restrained by the demands of broadcast safety.

Nevertheless, *All American: Homecoming* is a Black cast, HBCU-set drama run by a Black woman that centers a Black female protagonist. At no time in prior network television history have all of those words existed in a sentence together. Flawed as it may be, *AAH* is a historic step for Black femininity on broadcast. The question lingering at the end of this discussion, though, is whether the industrial constraints that undercut the show's could-be transgressive nature can or will change to allow for innovative explorations of Black feminine experiences on televisual platforms that do not exist behind a pay wall.

CHAPTER 3
LESSONS IN REFLECTION: *ABBOTT ELEMENTARY*'S BLACK FEMININE AUTHORSHIP

*"I think it's really cool that young women, and especially young Black women, can see themselves in this poorly dressed, always-making-mistakes girl. I think that's actually special for us. To me, that feels like a new version of representation: to identify with someone who is... not together yet. I think that's fun."*¹¹⁶

—Quinta Brunson on her character, Janine

While fictional second grade teacher and *Abbott Elementary*'s primary protagonist Janine Teagues is "poorly dressed," "always making mistakes," and "not together yet," it seems the multi-hyphenate responsible for bringing her to life is the diametric opposite of all of those things. Quinta Brunson has yet to miss on a red carpet or talk show look, has made enough right moves to land an overall deal with Warner Bros. TV, and is so "together" that her show was critically acclaimed and roundly celebrated after airing only a 13-episode first season. Initially garnering notoriety through her popular short skits on Vine and BuzzFeed, Brunson is now the creator and executive producer of, star and lead writer on the Emmy-, Golden Globe-, and Critics' Choice Award-winning sitcom. The program premiered on ABC in December of 2021 and is currently only in its second season, but has accrued ratings and a list of accolades that is unusual for such a young program—and one on a broadcast network, at that. Some trade journals and industry members have even credited Brunson and her breakout hit with the revival of the network sitcom. *Abbott Elementary* (*Abbott*) is certainly doing something different from its generic predecessors and is doing it quite well. To exclude a wildly successful primetime mockumentary series led by and centering Black women from this project would be

irresponsible; the show and its contextual situation offer an opportunity for rich analysis of the relationship between Black femininity and broadcast television.

In contrast to the genre driving the narrative content and representations of Blackness on *All American: Homecoming*, *Abbott* leads with a Black woman-centric story and appropriates the mockumentary format to tell it. In doing so, it exhibits what I term a “reflective discursive” strategy of Black feminine representation. The reflective televisual discourse I explore corresponds with Gray’s “multicultural” strategy explored in the introduction, but employs a more nuanced label. The multicultural paradigm Gray outlines and upholds as the ideal standard of Black representation “[engages] cultural politics of difference within the sign of Blackness” and provides space to constantly make, remake, modify, and extend Black culture and lived experiences.¹¹⁷ This is a helpful framing tool, but the term “multicultural” implies the presence of multiple ethnicities in a way that is inconsistent with the definition Gray provides, was ultimately appropriated to neoliberal capitalist ends and, thus, does not make sense to describe innovative and multifaceted explorations of Blackness on shows like *Abbott Elementary*.

As the century turned and media convergence continued to put pressure on producers, they diluted both the term and idea of multiculturalism, appropriating it to rename assimilationist strategies of including one or two non-white but normatively white-written and non-culturally specific roles on otherwise “neutral” white casts. Rhimes-era manifestations of these practices include, say, Miranda Bailey (Chandra Wilson) and the entire Grey Sloan staff’s apparent unawareness that she was a Black woman in leadership at a Seattle, WA hospital for the better part of *Grey’s Anatomy*’s run. Similarly, the lack of acknowledgement of Cristina Yang’s Koreanness, despite the writing for the character leaning into the “dragon lady” stereotype, exhibits a comparable carelessness for truly putting ethnic and cultural differences in

conversation with one another like Gray's multiculturalism advocates and instead simply putting bodies, not experiences, of color on white shows. At this point in television history, the term is inextricable from the negative connotations of its neoliberal degradation, and it is necessary that we move away from it.

The word "reflective" can describe a personal state of/related to deep or careful, inwardly directed thought or something that "gives back an image or reflection of an object, that mirrors or reproduces."¹¹⁸ A reflective discourse of Black representation operates on both of these levels. A text fitting within the reflective paradigm is driven by the vision and lived experiences of a Black creator and works to depict narratives that faithfully mirror or reproduce experiences consistent with the realities of Black American life. In the case at hand, reality finds Black women working to exist within the historically hostile institution of education while maintaining or finding their personal and cultural identities. This paradigm still "[engages] cultural politics of difference within the sign of Blackness" and provides space to constantly make, remake, modify, and extend Black culture and lived experiences, but does so without the baggage of an inaccurate, misleading, and fraught term.

In this chapter, I will first explicate how Brunson's intentions and creative execution engender a reflective discourse. Then, I will highlight *Abbott*'s relationship to a lineage of broadcast mockumentary sitcoms by examining the show's representation of whiteness through Jacob, one of two white characters. Finally, I will explore the show's representations of Black womanhood through a character analysis of Brunson's Janine and analysis narrative conflicts involving Ava and Barbara, the other two Black female main characters.

"The Soul of a Show": Origins and Authorial Intentions

Abbott is the most robust illustration of Black Feminist consciousness of the cases explored in this project; its creator/EP/head writer and three of its main characters all exhibit differing iterations of Black femininity. Recall the discussion of Patricia Hill Collins' foundational framework in the introduction, the paradigm of Black Feminist Thought is built around five core themes: legacy of struggle, intersectionality, self-definition, standpoint specific activism, and sexual politics.¹¹⁹ The premise and execution of the show as it has unfolded so far require it to meaningfully engage with each of these, whether that be overtly or subtextually. As such, the narrative is fundamentally built around Black Feminist perspectives, allowing for the exploration of other oppressive forces through an intersectional lens by default. As I will explore later, Janine's trauma-rooted and incessant optimism, Ava's propensity to hustle in any situation at almost any costs, and Barbara's rigidly moral worldview all illustrate varied relationships to this matrix that enrich the program's reflection of and on Black American femininity.

Aside from her role as creator and the fact that the titular school is named after her favorite teacher, the origin for the show is indelibly Black and feminine because Brunson's own mother, a public school teacher in West Philly, sparked the idea for what would become *Abbott*. She described the moment during a visit with her mother that got the ball rolling:

My mom was doing basically a parent-teacher conference with a parent on an open house night. The night started at 12 p.m. and ended at 8:00 p.m. No parents came the whole time. And I was there with my mom, waiting with her. A parent walks in at 7:58. And I was livid... But my mom didn't look at it that way. She was like, 'This is the time that this parent could get here, and she sat down and had the conference with her. And it was in that moment that something was sparked, where I said, 'This is what I want to make a show about.'¹²⁰

This story would become the narrative driving episode 1.10, “Open House.” Janine is eager to meet with the mother of a struggling student and as she waits, she observes and invites herself into Barbara and her visiting daughter’s relationship, one she wishes she had with her own mother. She is disappointed when Barbara tells her to butt out and when the anticipated parent does not arrive until the open house is over. Janine upbraids the parent for not caring, clearly projecting her resentment for her own mother onto her student’s mom. When the mother clarifies that she could not come earlier due to work and assures Janine that she just wants her daughter to succeed, Janine apologizes and invites her to sit down for the conference they were meant to have.

Both the event Brunson describes and its narrative counterpart invite consideration through a Black Feminist lens. In real life, Brunson’s own mother exhibited a patience for and understanding of the demands that may be facing parents at a school like Abbott Elementary and acts to ensure that her students receive the attention they need to succeed, a commitment that reflects intersectional and, in a way that we might not normally recognize, activist motivations. The episode arc sees Janine struggle while learning to embrace the same outlook.

At the same time that *Abbott* is doing this work, its interrogation of issues surrounding structural inequalities and oppression are, according to its creator, a byproduct of the desire to accurately represent the realities of experiences similar to its narratives. In fact, despite *Abbott*’s setting and premise, Brunson’s primary goal is not to “tackle issues” that affect the population depicted in the show. In an “Emerging Hollywood” interview for *The Hollywood Reporter*, she remarked, “If the issue gets tackled, then so be it... And why do *we* always have to tackle issues? How come I can’t make some dumb shit?” When her interviewer, Black media personality Charlamagne tha God responds that Black creators feel a responsibility for representation, she

invites him to reconsider if Blackness can be represented without tying it to “pressing issues.”¹²¹

Elaborating, she shares:

I hope that after the show finishes airing, it will have made something in the world just a little bit better. And I don’t want to do that by putting it in the show, I just want people to have a good time watching it. I want them to leave thinking about the human condition a little bit more.¹²²

The versions of the human condition this sitcom invites audiences to consider are centered primarily around varied Black feminine experiences. Later in the same interview, Charlamagne, asks if Brunson set out to make a product that was a commentary on underfunded schools, specifically. In response, she described how “the soul of [the] show,” one based in observations of social reality, drives the humor in her storytelling strategy:

I think a good show begins with a grounded topic, right. Like, we may not think of it that way, but *The Office* was about the work crisis at the time... When you build something from that place, it automatically yields good fruit most of the time. So my idea was to begin from that place. I’ve seen it first hand, what teachers go through from day to day. But, I wasn’t necessarily setting out to change anything or, like, beat people over the head with a message. I just knew that if we started in a real place, with the state of where we are right now... That’s the best way to start a comedy.¹²³

In the above quote, Brunson illustrates clear self-definitive and standpoint specific motives driving her approach to making a primarily Black workplace sitcom. She has prioritized what she, as a Black woman who grew up admiring other Black women as both personal role models and educators, knows from observations and experiences that are unique to her, ones that she

knows to be real and true because she has seen them first hand. The genre of the program appears to be a secondary factor shaping its presentation, the “realness” of Brunson and other Black women’s lived experiences are the soul.

Black and soulful as *Abbott* may be, it is still dependent upon the same commercial television industry that has historically marginalized specifically Black texts, excluding them from platforms that reached as broad an audience as their non-ethnic counterparts. Brunson is aware of this reality and also partially credits her being granted a broadcast prime time platform to Black creators on pay platforms. Later in the *Hollywood Reporter* interview, Charlamagne told Brunson, “I feel like *Abbott* is what happens when these networks give Black creators real budgets and don’t get in their way when it comes to notes and stuff like that.” Brunson offered the following response:

I have to agree with that. ABC was definitely the place. I just felt they were going to let me... They believed in me, like you said, the budget was there upfront. It wasn’t a fight, because, it’s surprising how much, you know, we still have to fight for pennies sometimes.¹²⁴

In a segment on *Desus & Mero*, she offered expanded insight on her project’s trajectory to ABC:

It was always my goal to have a show of some sort. And then I got more into the idea of doing it on ABC because when I just realized... It felt like we weren’t in those spaces. Like we were all going—whether we were being pushed or going there naturally—to streaming and cable, but none of us were really venturing into network yet... Shows like [*Desus & Mero*], shows like *Insecure*, shows like *Atlanta* helped prove to the network space that we can do this.¹²⁵

These quotes exhibit an intersectional industrial awareness that fortifies the reflective discourse the other two cases in this project failed to actualize, one that recognizes how subscription platform's courting and giving home to Black creative products eventually encouraged broadcasters to do the same while also acknowledging that many Black creatives still face difficulty in securing funding from those same corporations. As *Abbott's* creator, Brunson boasts both intimate knowledge of how the show came to be and a level of authorial agency that the Black women executive producers on *9-1-1* and *AAH* do not. However, ABC certainly did not fund the show simply out of goodwill for Black women in front of the camera, behind the scenes, and watching at home. The network had thrown support and funding behind a Black woman creator previously and that worked out quite profitably.

In large part, the Rhimes slate drew massive amounts of viewers and big bids from advertisers because the texts she produced, while they featured Black women prominently, were non-specific and drew a "universal" audience—that is, one defined by the sign of whiteness. This time the network, given the context explored throughout this project, simultaneously needs to illustrate an ability to keep up with "progressive" pay services and cannot afford to alienate the Black consumers who now make up more of the viewership and expect a baseline degree of specificity from texts lead by Black people. Brunson is right that Black creators' track record of success on cable and streaming likely helped open the door for a show like *Abbott*; her own involvement on HBO's *A Black Lady Sketch Show* certainly did not hurt. However, the "belief" to which she attributes ABC's investment and support is undergirded by both the network's interest in directly courting a diversified audience and its previous highly lucrative success with Shonda Rhimes.

Cynicism about capitalist media industries aside, Brunson and *Abbott* are intervening in both an industrial landscape and, as the next section explores, genre that have long needed a perspective that earnestly showcases the humanity, complexity, and variability within Black feminine experiences.

A Welcome Generic Intervention

Abbott Elementary seeks to reflect the realities of an underfunded urban school and does so with a fictional documentary as a narrative vehicle. Both actual documentaries and their fictional/farcical counterparts are necessarily reflective; the former delves into hidden or underrepresented realities in order to increase awareness or satisfy curiosity through understanding. The latter reflects upon that practice, often to make fun of or deconstruct its format and content. Mockumentaries “make a partial or concerted effort to appropriate documentary codes and conventions in order to represent a fictional subject.”¹²⁶ These texts use single, handheld camera cinematography, fourth wall-breaking “talking heads” and character-camera interactions, and other documentary hallmarks to tell often silly, absurd stories as if they were real, documented events. Sitcoms adopting this format have seen immense success on American broadcast networks since the mid-2000s. *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Modern Family* all came to draw large, loyal audiences relatively early in their runs and maintain them for their duration. These series adhered to a largely assimilationist paradigm when representing Black characters. That is, if they represented them at all.

In their 2001 survey of the genre, media scholars Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight argue that “all mock-documentary texts contain the potential for critical reflexivity, as an inherent part of their appropriation of documentary aesthetics, and that it is this role constructed for the viewer that consistently marks the mock-documentary out from other fact-fiction forms.”¹²⁷ This critical

reflexive potential is an invitational wink historically meant to “[flatter] the sensibilities of college-educated, liberal viewers who [have] sat through a documentary film class or two.” Network mockumentary sitcoms “elevated” the genre by ditching laugh tracks and the traditional camera sit-up, a flattering signal that they trusted their presumed upper and upper-middle class viewers’ “sophisticated” senses of humor to detect and dissect the jokes without being prompted.¹²⁸

In the throes of the Rhimes era, the college-educated, liberal viewers at whom the tongue-in-cheek humor of the above series was directed were assumed to be—meant to be, if we are thinking in terms of revenue for networks and advertisers—white. As such, the main characters and, in fact, the majority of the large ensembles on these shows were white. On *The Office*, the Scranton Dunder Mifflin branch had two Black employees: Stanley (Leslie David Baker) and Darryl (Craig Robinson). Stanley, a regular throughout the series, was the embodiment of an eye roll; he did not respect Michael’s authority but stayed in the job to bide his time until retirement. His brief lines were almost exclusively sassy lamentations of boss Michael’s (Steve Carrell) ineptitude or expressions of disdain for his job. Darryl was, essentially, the Black version of Jim (John Krasinski). In his appearances, he was typically the straight man to Michael’s buffoon, deadpan as he taught him a fake, extremely silly “Black handshake” or made up a tale about his latest run in with a gang. All the while, he would shoot the camera knowing looks that indicated the joy he took in highlighting Michael’s ignorance. *Parks* had one definitively Black series regular, comedian Retta’s Donna, who this chapter will explore in a later section.¹²⁹ *Modern Family* had virtually no recurrent or regular Black characters, as the only members of color between the Pritchett, Dunphy, and Tucker-Pritchett families were Vietnamese and Colombian.

These Black mockumentary characters all received similar narrative treatment on *The Office* and *Parks*. They were the cool, savvy foils to Michael and Leslie's over-eager dorkiness. These unidimensional Black characters functioned to highlight the ridiculous behavior of their white counterparts, ultimately deepening the protagonists' characterization as they are redeemed in the resolution of an episode conflict or across a longer arc. While episode after episode we peeled back another layer of Michael or Leslie's motivations and persona, these Black characters on mostly white casts received neither complex characterization nor the airtime to explore it.

The cast of *Abbott*, set in West Philadelphia, is nearly exclusively Black. There are only two white characters in the core ensemble: Janine's second grade teaching partner, super-tough South Philly Sicilian Melissa (Lisa Ann Walter) and Jacob, a character explored in depth in the next section. Considering the racial makeup of the series described above, this casting choice of having only two white members of the core ensemble is a reformation of the mockumentary format in and of itself. Like *The Office*, *Parks*, *Modern Family*, and most sitcoms across American television history, differences in experience and perspective—be they personal, generational, class-bound, or tied to objectives—are the primary drivers of conflict and comedy on *Abbott*. However, unlike its broadcast mockumentary predecessors, that comedy is not anchored in a false neutrality of assumed whiteness. As I explored in the previous section, the show's origin, premise, and its creator's intention make it inherently Black, feminine, and revolutionary within the mockumentary genre.

“Anti-Racist Icarus”: Jacob's Reflection Of and On Whiteness

Paradoxically, one of the reasons *Abbott*'s exploration of Blackness via the mockumentary format is a revolutionary is its representations of whiteness. The minimal presence of white characters is one piece of the puzzle, but the series takes it a step further by

giving those characters layered identities that offer sites for both comedy and critical thought as we get to know them. The most recognizable and frequent illustration of this narrative strategy is through Chris Perfetti's Jacob Hill: the corny, uber-progressive, know-it-all middle school history teacher and Janine's workplace best friend. A textbook millennial, gay man, and one half of an interracial relationship, Jacob is constantly going to extreme, often awkward lengths to prove his "down-ness" to his co-workers whether that's sharing the weighty/boring content of a NowThis video or podcast he consumed, proclaiming that "gluten intolerance is just internalized white guilt"¹³⁰ in the break room, or exclaiming "you know, I actually applied to Morehouse" at an Abbott student step show.¹³¹ Effectively, Jacob is a caricature of the assumed viewer of past mockumentary sitcoms. As the show's primary author, Brunson is using the character to sharpen the varied illustrations of Black womanhood she explores through contrast. A scene explicitly tells us as much in a season two episode in which Abbott students try sell candy bars to the community to raise money for a fieldtrip. While advising a group of students on how to hustle, Ava tells them to target Jacob-types:

Ava (pointing at Jacob): "And you're gonna wanna look out for liberal white people."

Jacob: "Actually, I consider myself to be a progressive."

Student 1: "Is there a difference?"

A (gives a knowing look): "You'll be able to spot them because they'll be making this face." She paints on a wide-eyed soft smile; Jacob looks deeply offended. "If you can't sell candy bars to them, you're unteachable."

Student 2 pretends to fall.

J: "Oh, Malika! Are you okay?"

Malika (sweetly): “No. But I’d feel a lot better if you bought some candy from me, an at-risk Black youth.”¹³²

Jacob functions to burlesque the very white liberal/progressive political expression mockumentaries of the Rhimes era leveraged to target a particular type of viewer. Through his obvious lack of Black cultural knowledge/capital and sometimes-misguided zeal for inclusivity, Jacob is the butt of many jokes and, at times, a source of conflict.

Jacob’s stark difference from those around him is also articulated through his inability navigate specifically Black communication practices and cultural references employed by his co-workers and students. For instance, in a recent season two episode, this is evidenced by him trying and failing to surreptitiously ask his phone’s voice assistant who director/producer Lee Daniels and R&B icon Jazmine Sullivan are during conversations involving the rest of his colleagues. Episode 1.5, “Student Transfer,” a secondary plotline sees Jacob deal with being clowned by his students with Gregory’s guidance, thus offering a more substantial example of this characteristic for dissection. In the hallway, the pair’s conversation is interrupted by an insult from a student directed at Jacob:

Student: “What up, ole curlyhead-Arthur-from-PBS-lookin’ boy!”

Jacob: “And good morning to you, Rahim!”

Gregory: “You let them talk to you like that?!”

J: “Correct me if I’m wrong, but the boys and I are bonding in the tradition of playing the dozens. It’s also called ‘roasting,’ also called ‘blazing,’ ‘frying.’ Hm. A lot of cooking terminology.”

G: “Look, man, I’m from Baltimore, okay. All I know is when somebody roasts you, you gotta roast them back. Our teachers used to roast us, and if they didn’t, we wouldn’t’ve respected them! You’re just getting clowned!”

J: “Of course, I’m being clowned! Okay? I don’t know how to roast.”

G: “It’s not that hard. You just kinda have to take what people give you. Like, ‘you ole mothball sweater vest-lookin’ boy.’”

J: “Hm. Simple yet cutting. Okay. Thank you. I thought you had to bring way more to the table.”¹³³

Later, Jacob tries and fails to put Gregory’s advice into practice as his students giggle at his expense and he works to regain control of his classroom:

Student 1: “Lookin’ like Ron Weasley if he was a pickup artist!”

Rahim: “This man looks like he dreams in podcasts!”

J: “Well, look at you, ole blue shirt, tan pants wearin’ guy, with your bright white shoes and the laces all tied up into a little bow! Yeah, no way those are accidentally fallin’ off!”

R: “Mr. Vampire Weekend, that really hurt my feelings.”

J: “Rahim, I am—I am so sorry.”

R: “You should be... With that *Twilight*-shaped mouth!”

Student 1: “Ha ha! Got him!”

R: “That’s what we’re all wearing; it’s a uniform! You ain’t even observant, dawg!”¹³⁴

The next day, Jacob relays the event to Gregory emphasizing that the clowning got worse by sharing that his students called him “*HuffPo*-reading gay Pete Buttigieg, which is repetitive and

insulting,” adding that he would never “read a word of *Huffington Post* after Arianna stepped down.” Gregory advises that he may just have to “take the L” and give up because he cannot beat them at their own game. He explains, that trying to do so would be “like them challenging [Jacob] to... Dungeons & Dragons.”¹³⁵ Jacob launches into an unsolicited explanation of the machinations of the notoriously nerdy roleplaying game before he suddenly gets an idea to solve his problem, awkwardly thanks Gregory, and runs out of the room. Later, he successfully leads his class in a “Heads Up” style activity where one student tries to guess the name of a historical figure based on the roasts their classmates call out.

This arc offers swift development of the cultural-outsider aspect of Jacob’s character. First, his unfamiliarity with this element of Black American culture is the root of a significant professional problem. He is being actively disrespected by the students he is supposed to be teaching but cannot respond properly because he has never experienced the practice. Secondly, the jokes the students make about him comically underscore the facets of his identity that the audience already knows to associate with this archetype, likely through their own real-life experiences with individuals holding some similarities to the character at hand.

Jacob’s general awkwardness and disparate experiences from those around him lead to funny failures in interaction, but the intentions behind his words and action point to a desire to be inclusive and truly relate to the other members of the community despite his stark difference from them. In doing so, he serves as a critique of whiteness that allows for the robust assertion of Black femininity. He is defined by his lack of what Janine, Ava, and Barbara, specifically, have: Black, feminine cultural ties and outlooks framed by their intersectional social positions. His enthusiasm to connect across this difference has been highlighted frequently in the series so far. In episode 1.4, “New Tech,” he shares with his colleagues how excited he is to teach about

Philadelphia unions, many of which started in South Philly, the region Melissa is from. She expresses her excitement and stops by to peek in on his lesson, but is visibly dismayed to hear the rosy way he describes the union/non-union worker alliance that helped solve the South Philly labor crisis. She confronts him about his “garbage” lesson that misconstrues the event. Indignantly, he insists that he “knows the history of the lesson” because he has read several books and listened to several podcasts on the subject. Melissa responds that she and her family *lived* it, so she knows the real history. He excitedly takes her up on an offer to invite who he assumes to be a police captain with firsthand experience to aid the next lesson, not realizing that source she knows was a strike captain. When the invitee’s presentation does not go as Jacob expected, he pulls Melissa aside and questions her intentions for bringing this guest:

J: “Why did you bring him here?!”

Melissa: “Uh, didn’t we agree to this?”

J: “I thought you were bringing a police captain! Someone to talk about how the union worked together in peace!”

M: “That’s not the real story! This is the truth: he’s giving them an eyewitness account to history!”

J: “Eyewitness? I think the term is accomplice!”

M: “This is the problem I have with people like you. You want to romanticize the city, but you won’t acknowledge the truth. Like, you wanna run up the *Rocky* steps, but you can’t take a punch in the face!”

J: “I can take a punch in the face! Wh-what are you saying, I’m some kinda, like, hipster poser? Look, I care! I’m her teaching. Every day!”

M: “No, I’m saying you can’t teach the kids *right* if you don’t respect where they’re from. It’s about respect.”¹³⁶

Later, he brings her lasagna as a peace offering, inadvertently leaning into a stereotype, but proceeds to offer a heartfelt apology for his behavior:

J: “Melissa, I made some dumb assumptions about you, about South Philly. I was condescending... Basically, I was a jerk!”

...

J: “Well, I’m really sorry.”

M: “Listen. You’re trying to sanitize this place and its history. It doesn’t need it. It’s who we are. The good, the bad, and the ugly...”

...

M: “Hey, I know you mean well, hon. You want the best for your kids. Just, next time, have a more open mind, that’s all.”¹³⁷

This episode arc that explores conflict between the ensemble’s only two white characters both indicts the pitfalls of uninformed white progressivity and serves as a pedagogical tool for reflecting on the source and potentially harmful outcomes of that outlook. Jacob, having researched the topic through literature and podcasts, thinks himself enough of an expert on the subject to teach it, even when confronted with Melissa’s familiarity and experience. He believes he is doing the noble thing by painting a picture of peaceful cooperation between workers and their employers when, in actuality, his sanitized rendering of the events erases the lived experiences of affected individuals. In doing so, he deprives his students, also belonging to a marginalized population, of a perspective that can shape their outlook on their home and their relationship to it. Melissa’s critique of “people like” Jacob employs the reflective discourse at

work throughout the series, holding up a mirror to the past mockumentaries' assumed viewer persona and reminds all viewers, especially those who think that engagement with history/issues through texts alone entitles them to space in every conversation, to reflect on what they know and how they know it.

Silly and self-unaware as he may be, Jacob is complex and ultimately still likable across the show's run to date. In season two, we learn more about him and roots of his behavior. Episode 2.3 dedicates the A-plot to an exploration of his corniness. In "Story Samurai," an ultra-corny improvisational storytelling troupe that Jacob used to be a part of comes to the school to perform for the students. Jacob is ecstatic and even accepts the performers' invitation to join them for their second show, much to everyone except Janine's excitement, as they are eager to watch Jacob make a fool of himself. Janine is very concerned that he will embarrass himself and wants to protect his feelings because "he just puts so much thought into how he's perceived."¹³⁸ To convince him not to perform, she insists that as a white teacher in a Black school, he is "Hilary Swank in *Freedom Writers*," he is "Michelle Pfeifer in *Dangerous Minds*," he is "Sandra Bullock in *The Blindside*," and should not give his colleagues or students any more fodder for laughing at his expense, succeeding in her goal of dissuading him but hurting his feelings in the process.¹³⁹ After having a change of heart, Janine encourages Jacob to take the stage during the assembly. Confidence renewed, he does so, performing an improvised story about Tony the Tiger as an allegory for racial discrimination, claiming pride his corniness as his colleagues debrief the performance with him.

Jacob's "Story Samurai" arc shows a deep sensitivity judgement from others and sheds light on the fact that Jacob's know-it-all "wokeness" is tied to a desire to be perceived positively in an environment where he is the minority. What is funny, sad, and thought provoking is that his

behavior is often counterproductive to achieving that objective. We see this play out again in episode 2.10, “Holiday Hookah.” He is reluctantly invited to join Barbara and Melissa’s annual holiday hangout, which he ruins with his incessant spouting of as “anti-Kringle rhetoric” and “withering takes” about Christmas and its traditions. After the two women have had enough and storm out, Mr. Johnson (the custodian) checks him on his bummer behavior. As he apologizes to Barbara and Melissa, he shares that he has only negative memories about the holiday which has historically carried a lot of anxiety for him. Like the previous example, this reveals some of Jacob’s inner workings. Additionally, it provides viewers of all backgrounds an almost universally relatable experience with which they can identify: anxiety and attempting to cope with it. At the same time though, it intentionally decenters white identities and feelings because this is not the space for them, unlike virtually other space. Jacob’s anxiety is relatable and his unresolved existence in it is purposeful; it reminds everyone watching that this is a Black story.

One season two story line is particularly redemptive for Jacob and pedagogical for viewers. In episode 2.14, “Valentine’s Day,” a parent, Tristan, “takes umbrage” with the idea of Jacob teaching Black history during Black History Month because he is white and expresses that discontent to Ava. She fails to convince him that “underpaying a white teacher to teach Black history is almost reparation,” so she assures the parent that she will observe Jacob’s classes for herself.¹⁴⁰ As the day progresses, Ava observes all of Jacob’s class periods, finding herself enjoying his teaching and enthusiastically engaging in the lesson about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Importantly, Jacob encourages his students to question the ways Black American history is presented, even in his class:

Jacob: “...See, history is constantly being rewritten. That is why you need to question everything. Okay? You should even question me, a white teacher.”¹⁴¹

Eventually, Ava reveals to Jacob that he has inspired her to return to school as a student, relieving his anxiety that her observations would lead to his firing because he “flew too close to the sun, like an Anti-Racist Icarus,” by teaching Black history to his Black students.¹⁴² As Tristan returns to pick up his son, Ava defends Jacob’s teaching:

A: “...Don’t judge him by the color of his skin but by the content of his class...”

T: “So, you didn’t listen to any of my concerns.”

A: “Why are you just now getting concerned? I found out in class that Jacob teaches about Black historical figures all year, not just February! Did you just start paying attention this month?”¹⁴³

This episode arc is multifunctional. First, it puts Ava and Jacob in more scenes together in a different configuration than usual, allowing us to see a new facet of their relationship that they are also just discovering. Second, it deepens Ava’s character, allowing us to see her as an eager student, not just a quick witted, largely ineffectual supervisor. Finally, Jacob’s teaching and Ava’s discussion of it act as a model of how non-Black Americans can and should approach Black American history and issues. This fortifies the sincerity behind his usually over the top expressions his progressivity, working to prove that his solidarity is not just performativity.

Jacob functions as the pedagogical inverse of characters like Stanley on *The Office* or Donna on *Parks*. In those shows, the Black characters were diversity tokens, supporting characters whose primary function was to highlight Michael’s/Leslie’s foolery with a raised eyebrow and some sassy commentary. On *Abbott*, Jacob is in the racial minority of his workplace and it is primarily his direct characterization that makes him a site for commentary instead of a sole reliance on sound bites or expressions from his co-workers, nearly all of whom are Black.

Character Analysis: Janine

While Jacob's social shortcomings function to reassert the centrality of Blackness on Abbott, Janine's dorkiness comically illustrates the obstacles Black women often face in establishing a professional identity. They are required to navigate institutions that are neither by nor for them and were founded without recognizing them as full humans. On broadcast mockumentary series, the model for Black characters attempting to transcend these challenges is narrativized as their individual victory or defeat, manifested in their cynicism, antagonism of their bosses, self-indulgence, or full disengagement from the workplace. In their respective workplaces, protagonists Michael Scott and Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) were consistently shown to be layered, complex people. The same cannot be said for the Black series regulars. As showrunner and star, Quinta Brunson necessarily brings dimension and complexity, to her character. Like Leslie and Michael, Janine is an undeniable dork. For the first time in the broadcast mockumentary paradigm, though, the performance of that dorkiness is inherently tied to a Black woman's identity.

Through Janine, Brunson subverts the characterization expectations of a Black female character in a broadcast mockumentary sitcom, the only material for robust comparison being *Parks*' Donna Meagle. Described by Leslie as "confident" and "worldly," Donna is undeniably cool: a proud player with several men in rotation at any given time for most of the series, a prolific Twitter user and abreast of all popular culture happenings, unabashedly nonchalant at work, and always willing to treat herself to the luxury she knows she deserves. That cool wittiness, however, is very nearly her only character trait. We never learn much about her background, what has led to her incredibly confident, luxury-seeking, pop-culture obsessed persona. As the only Black woman in the Parks and Rec. department and, apparently, in fictional

Pawnee, Indiana, Donna's demeanor and vernacular set her apart from her co-workers as much as her appearance does. That said, the role of Donna does not necessarily require a Black actress and could have been played by a woman of any background; her race is never explicitly addressed. In fact, very little about her is culturally specific besides her occasional slippage into AAVE and the running joke that musical artist Ginuwine is her cousin. Through the critical lens framing this project, a generous assessment of Donna's performance of Black womanhood would place her in the acculturative category—exhibiting a few elements of specificity and cultural acknowledgment, but never in ways that challenge hegemonic views of difference. An even less optimistic examination would place her in the same assimilationist paradigm as *Grey's* Miranda Bailey or *The Vampire Diaries*' Bonnie Bennett; her racial difference is visible but essentially ignored narratively.

On the other hand, Janine is to *Abbott* what Leslie was to *Parks*. Her unbridled and misguided optimism are the primary narrative motor, not unlike Leslie's corn-fed, pro-government, can-do attitude. It is very clear, though, that Janine's background differs from not only Leslie's, but most of the characters on past broadcast mockumentaries in several ways that help execute the specifically Black feminine intervention that the character makes in the genre. Unlike Donna, Janine is comically far from cool, and this lack of social clout has been one of the character's defining characteristics, illustrated in multiple ways. Though this is often literally visible through sight gags including her lack of fashion sense or need to wear Velcro sneakers because she never learned how to tie laces, it is more meaningfully illustrated through her relation to her co-workers and the insight she gives when she directly addresses the camera. As we get to know the character, the roots of her behavior become clearer, many of them tied to her intersectional social position.

Within the first minute of the series, Janine introduces herself via talking head, stating that as “a product of the Philadelphia school system, I’m proud to say a I survived and now teach here today.”¹⁴⁴ The talking head is immediately followed by a shot her teaching about presidents from a book in which she has had to tape Obama through Biden, clearly because she has not been allocated funds for a new one. She admits, “I know this school is rough, but I became a teacher to make sure students come out alive.”¹⁴⁵ Not even two minutes into the series, both her personal stakes in the profession, the school, and the school’s marginal funding situation are made evident. The episode’s conflict stems from the blind optimism driven by her commitment helping the students. After a student urinates on the rug in her room, Janine campaigns to Ava for money for new ones, naively believing that Ava will come through despite her track record of incompetence. When Ava spends all of the money on a new sign for the school’s entrance, one with a large image of her, Janine emails the superintendent about the incident, not realizing that it will bounce from his inbox to Ava’s. After Ava humiliates Janine in front of the entire faculty for going over her head, Barbara, Jacob, and Melissa find her in the hallway looking into her classroom through its window:

Janine: “Every lunch period, Barbara. Every single one, Amir comes and naps on the rug.”

Barbara: “Mmhmm, he was in my class. Mom’s got a lot of kids, Dad’s not around and when he is, the parents fight.”

J: “Right, so he doesn’t get much sleep. I tell him to sleep at his desk, but he says the rug is softer, softer than his bed at home. You know what, I don’t care if you think I’m good at this or not anymore. I care about whether or not I can make a change.”

B: “Janine. Teachers at a school like Abbott, we have to be able to do it all. We are admin., we are social workers, we are therapists, we are second parents...

Hell, sometimes, we’re even first! Why? It sho’ ain’t the money.

...

B: “You wanna know my secret? Do everything you can for your kids. We’ll help!”¹⁴⁶

As the conversation draws to a close, she gets the idea to ask Melissa’s stadium build contact to get them rugs from Eagles stadium which is being renovated by the city, showing that “going outside the system” is often how teachers make the system work.

The second and third episodes have similar arcs. Janine sees a problem—a faulty hallway light and a lack of community wishlist donations, respectively—naively believes that she can fix them herself but, before the issue is resolved by the episode’s end, actually worsens the situation, making it harder for everybody else. This affects not only her colleagues, but also impacts her students, sometimes in the very ways she is trying to prevent. In episode 2.8, “Egg Drop,” she is determined to have her students participate in an egg drop experiment, even though they are only in second grade and the lesson is meant for the middle schoolers. She is adamant that belief in themselves is the only element her students need to succeed in the project, spurring their deluded optimism and, ultimately, deep disappointment when all of them fail. In a talking head, she reveals the real reason that she has encouraged this misleading optimism in her students:

When I was little, I could never keep my shoes tied and people loved to make fun of that. But then, I got Velcro shoes and they made fun of that, too, but here’s what I learned about failure: It sucks, and I don’t want my kids to feel it. Time to get them some Velcro shoes!¹⁴⁷

So, this ill-fated endeavor is an extension of her mission to help students “survive” the same system she did and, perhaps, even make it out with less emotional scars. She wants to protect them from the negative feelings that stand out in her own experience as a student, even though instances of failure are necessary for learning. In this case, her overzealous and optimistic attempt to protect them from experiencing failure backfires and, until she finds a way to fix it at the end of the episode, is painful for them. Having grown up in the same marginalized social group, working class neighborhood, and underfunded system as her students, Janine sees her own experiences—triumphant, traumatic, and in between—reflected back to her in the youth she is responsible for guiding. Watching her process both her current professional life and personal background models the process of reflection while inviting the audience consider how and why their experiences differ from hers.

Another reason Janine’s job is so important to her is that, in both her own experience as a student and in her career, school has provided her the relationships she was denied in “the real world.” From early on, it is clear that her distinction between colleagues and family/friends is not a strong one. For instance, in “Step Class” (1.9), Janine sponsors an after school club where she teaches students step. She shares via talking head that, when she was in school, a similar club provided her the structure she desired but lacked at home. When Ava joins her and the students like her coaching style better, Janine is hurt that the members of the club rejected the guidance that she had found vital as a kid. This is the first in a series of allusions to a fraught maternal relationship that is clearly a source of pain for Janine and, even if she does not always realize it, a factor heavily influencing her relationships to her work and those around her.

In “Open House,” explored in the first section, her desire for a maternal figure is clear through her stating that “Barbara’s [her] mentor and, you know what? She’s kinda like [her]

mom. She's [her] mom-tor" and her awkward attempts to insert herself in Barbara and Taylor's "ideal" relationship.¹⁴⁸ Throughout the episode, she seeks Barbara's guidance and reassurance as she gears up to speak to the parent of a struggling student, one she assumes does not care about the student's progress, much like her own mother throughout her academic career. In the talking head after Barbara introduces her daughter, Janine shares:

I can't even imagine having a mom like Barbara. I used to do this thing with my mom where I would say to her *exactly* what I wanted to hear, hoping she would say it back, and she would just keep playing my GameBoy. So.¹⁴⁹

This facet of the character recurs in episode 2.18, "Teacher Appreciation," when her estranged sister visits. In an argument between the two, Janine reveals that she resents her sister for moving away from Philly and leaving Janine to care for their mother by herself, with no other help. The series has not yet revealed why Janine's mother was neglectful or need to be taken care of by her children, but it is clear that the relationship has affect Janine's life in ways that she is just now confronting and working to repair.

Abbott establishes that, on a personal level, Janine struggles to forge and maintain relationships. In season one, we learn that she has been dating her boyfriend Tariq since she was in eighth grade, making their relationship over a decade long. In season two, after they break up, she shares that almost all of her friends were actually just Tariq's friends so, since their relationship ended, she does not have any friends outside of her workplace. Moreover, the one non-Abbott friend of Janine's we meet in season one is her only friend from college, one she's held onto since freshman year, who turns out to be awful by then end of her one-episode arc.

This exploration of Janine's complex dorkiness is useful to this project not because being a dork is a dimension of oppression, but because the character's personal background and

relationship to the institutional structures of public school are derived from her position as a Black woman. In the broadcast mockumentary paradigm, investigation of the backgrounds that drive behavior has been reserved for white protagonists whose narrative arcs are partially bolstered by flat, minimally specific Black characters. On *Abbott*, the protagonist is written and performed by a creator who can directly identify with the nuances of Black feminine experiences because of her own identity and the inspiration she can draw from Black women with whom she has connected throughout her life.

Characterizing Ava and Barbara through Generation- and Class-Based Tension

In addition to Brunson's Janine, *Abbott* uses Janelle James' Ava and Sheryl Lee Ralph's Barbara to reflect the range of strategies Black women may employ to cope with institutional demands. Explored a bit in a previous section, "Fundraiser" (2.13), offers robust character development for both Ava and Barbara by putting them in conflict with one another. Barbara is spearheading the aforementioned fundraising efforts to take the whole school to visit The Franklin Institute science museum. She teaches the kids to engage very politely with potential candy buyers, a tactic that fails to make them very much money. Desperate to make the trip happen, she takes Ava's offer to help the kids increase sales, leading to the predatory tutorial described earlier and, eventually, arguments between the two after Ava's coaching of the kids leads to Barbara's embarrassment in front of frenemies from church:

B: "Did you know that the students are overcharging for the candy?"

A: "Oh, yeah, I told 'em to do it! Great job, Henry!"

B: "Why would you tell the children to overcharge for the candy?"

A: "It's called an incentive! It's why, even after all the kids knew the Ava Coleman Method, my group was outselling yours 3 to 1."

B: "What are they doing with the extra money?"

A: "Whatever they want, it's their commission! Have you never worked retail?"

B: "I have been retelling the principles of the Bible my entire life! And that is why I am livid that you are teaching these children to steal!"

A: "Steal? Okay, hold on now."

B: "Henry got caught overcharging Sister Sloss and I was *humiliated* in front of my co-workers in Christ!"

...

B: "No fieldtrip is worth corrupting these students. You and I had a deal, and I made a terrible mistake trusting you!"¹⁵⁰

The student that Barbara catches overcharging her acquaintances is Henry, a middle school-aged boy. In the first act, we meet him because he comes to Ava for help; he has had a major growth spurt and his pants are laughably short. He is getting "roasted alive" but is sure he will not be able to get new clothes before the school year ends. Apparently prepared for this situation, Ava opens a desk drawer and pulls out a new pair of pants that will fit him. Before Henry leaves, he begrudgingly delivers the dry sales script for the fundraiser at Ava's request. She is unimpressed but unsurprised that Barbara has taught "the tactics of a man that could turn water into wine and still only had 12 friends."¹⁵¹ This interaction is her motive for getting involved in the first place. She shares this with Barbara in a tense exchange after they've spent the post-debacle school day avoiding and ignoring one another:

A: "Well, if you got something *else* to say to me, then just say it. But what you not gon' do is give me the cold shoulder in this school that I own."

B: “Again, the principal runs—does not own—the school.”

A: “Do you know how many times Henry comes to my office needing pants or lunch money or something?”

B: “I’m happy he trusts you enough to ask for help.”

A: “It doesn’t matter how much he trusts me. I wanna teach him to make extra money to pocket so he can take care of himself! Some of our students don’t have it like that!”

B: “I have been an educator longer than you have been alive, and I am well aware of our students’ many stressors and financial situations. But, that does not mean that they should lie, cheat, or scam!”

A: “Nobody got hurt because he sold that candy for a little more, and the only reason that you get to have morals about this is because *you* can afford them. You didn’t grow up havin’ to make hard choices! I did. And what you call scamming got me by. And look at me now: I own a school!”¹⁵²

A later scene shows Barbara apologizing to Henry. Ava observes and approaches Barbara to say that the next time she steps in to help she will share the whole story, a non-apology clearly extended and received as an olive branch.

The storyline and dialogue above perform two interdependent functions that are helpful to this chapter’s analysis of reflective discursivity. They deepen the audience’s understanding of the involved characters’ personal backgrounds and outlooks while also exhibiting conflict rooted in the women’s divergent positions at differing intersections of oppressive forces. Ava’s commentary highlights that Barbara can “afford to have morals” in the situation in both figurative and literal senses. Growing up without many material resources, Ava knows what it’s

like to need something and exploit an opportunity to get it, even though it defies dominant notions of ethicality. To survive, she had to “make hard choices” that got her by. If abiding by a strict moral compass jeopardizes the ability to fulfill basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing, then is “scamming” to secure those resources not preferable to sacrificing one’s wellbeing to go without them? Using a reflective lens to scrutinize the circumstances of poverty to which Ava alludes requires consideration of how that situation came to be. Zooming out, the answer is, unsurprisingly, the structural inequality of a system that is built upon and perpetuates the exploitation of people of color.

Throughout the series, Ava is shown to be a sort of Michael Scott/Donna Meagle fusion. She is quick-witted and fashionable but also a consistently inept boss. Her impressive social prowess, extensive pop culture knowledge, and highly quotable one liners are certainly reminiscent of Donna. At the same time, her shameless interactions with and in front of the camera, uncanny ability to make nearly any situation about herself, and inappropriate workplace behavior recall Michael. Like the former, she acts as the comedic relief that seems to operate on a different frequency and have a different relationship to her job than her colleagues. Importantly, like the latter, she is also afforded the narrative space necessary to be complex and multidimensional. Grays multicultural discursive strategy asks that texts represent the specificity, dynamism, and range within Black American experiences. The reflective discursivity proposed here does the same, recognizing that the ethnic and cultural difference within the sign of Blackness can manifest in configurations we usually do not see illustrated on broadcast television by critically reflecting the intersectional realities of Black American womanhood.

From the outset of the series, it is clear that Ava knows how to manipulate a situation to swing the outcome her way. In the pilot, she proudly tells the camera that she secured her

position by blackmailing the superintendent of Philadelphia public school system. “I go to the same church as the superintendent, caught him cheating on his wife with the deaconess. I needed a job!”¹⁵³ She alludes to this fact often throughout the first season. In “Open House,” for example, Gregory reminds her that her boss will be there and she should “act more like a principal,” she responds that she is not worried because “[that] man is in [her] pocket like Jay-Z after the elevator.”¹⁵⁴ Across her series arc, there are several other allusions to side gigs that make her money. In “Wishlist” (1.3), she uses her TikTok editing and click baiting skills, plus the large following they gained her, to get massive amounts of donations for Janine and Barbara. In season two, she spends a workday reselling clothes online in “Juice” (2.5) and, in “Story Samurai,” records the first corny performance to “[bootleg] it for barbershop distribution” and secures a sponsor to livestream the second on social media.

Ava hustles. She finds a way to monetize most opportunities. When she does not, she looks for ways to optimize her social clout so that she can potentially make money elsewhere—like allowing a documentary crew to record her poor leadership of an underfunded school so she can gain exposure. Her actions and words in “Fundraiser” reveal the foundations for that behavior. She grew up in an environment that required her “to make hard choices” between following the rules of social acceptability and surviving. Choosing self-preservation, she makes it clear that she did what she needed to do to take care of herself, regardless of the moral value assigned to those deeds. It is implicit that she sees her experiences as a youth reflected in Henry’s plight. Ava’s lack of resources as a youth undoubtedly resulted from the detrimental interaction of systems designed to oppress Black Americans. To secure resources and survive, she circumvented those systems and the rules they sought to impose upon her and continues to do so as an adult. In doing so, however, she is subjected to judgment that associates her behavior

with a lack of morality, a notion deployed to dehumanize Black women and justify their mistreatment for approximately half a millennium.

In contrast to Ava, Barbara is old school, deeply religious, and has a clear moral outlook on the work teachers do. She is the no-nonsense, pragmatic, seasoned veteran to Janine's wide-eyed, naïve, overzealous optimist, believing "the job is working with what you've got so you don't get let down."¹⁵⁵ Her first talking head in the pilot is direct in making most of those traits known: "I'm Barbara Howard, woman of God. I do my work, I go home. I get my nails done once a week and... I love teaching."¹⁵⁶ We later learn that she is the most senior teacher at Abbott, having taught in the district for 20 years and, in season two, that she has been a teacher longer than Ava has been alive, which we can assume to be somewhere around 30 years. As discussed earlier, Janine sees her as an idealized maternal figure and role model; both she and the other members of the ensemble seek out and benefit from her experience and wisdom. At times though, her age, rigid outlook, and pride get in the way of her adapting to new challenges or even relating to those around her.

For example, in "New Tech" (1.4), the district mandates that all teachers use a new data tracking system designed to help them improve their students' literacy and, therefore, test scores. Barbara struggles to use the new technology but refuses to admit that she needs help, pretending everything is going swimmingly. In reality, she never really learns to use the program, simply teaching her Kindergarteners to read as she has for decades, but inputting data that she knows will satisfy system. This backfires, as the app reports to Ava that Barbara's students, five and six year olds, are reading on a fourth grade level and organizes an assembly to showcase their "skills." She is forced to admit to her dishonesty in front of the whole school, later telling Janine that she lied because she sometimes feels like she is being "pushed out to sea" by younger

teachers and new technologies but did not want anyone to know. Janine assures her that it can be confusing for everyone and suggests they work together to figure it out, only for the district to rescind the initiative, as it is revealed that the program was invented by the state penal system to predict future prisoner populations from low literacy scores and adjust capacity.

The “New Tech” storyline illustrates her generational distance from the other teachers in the ensemble, as she struggles to even log into the tablet provided to her, let alone use the program effectively. While Janine, Jacob, Ava, and Gregory are all likely millennials, Barbara and Melissa presumably belong to Generation X. As such, Barbara’s outlook would be shaped by her growing up in the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The hegemonic discourse of integration flourished in the years that followed. This ideology “was deeply rooted in the logic of assimilation, which...was codified into a social project of color blindness, a legal project of equal opportunity, and a moral project of individualism and self-responsibility.”¹⁵⁷ Often, Barbara exhibits sensibilities that seem guided by the respectability politics that dictated “acceptable” Black behavior—acting in ways that were non-offensive to white people, assimilating—would lead to economic success and social integration for newly recognized Black citizens. For instance, in the cold open of the episode just discussed, she turns her nose up at Janine’s teaching Philly slang as sight words, asserting that she is “abandoning the phonics principles that these children need” and that “this is a classroom, not a hoagie stand.”¹⁵⁸ She remains unimpressed despite Janine’s valid reassurance that these are words their students hear daily, and are thus helpful in building their reading skills and confidence. Barbara’s modes of relating and rigid worldview are reflective of the real influence of respectability politics in constraining Black women’s behavior in relation to the institutions they are required to inhabit.

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of this dynamic, aside from the conflict with Ava outlined earlier, occurs in “Egg Drop” (2.8). Barbara is dismayed that the mother of one of her students, Krystal, has “Bitch” tattooed prominently across her chest, visible because of her “revealing” clothes. In a talking head she exclaims that as “a good Christian woman, [she] would never mark her body with such an obscenity” and that she does not “even believe in saying that word out loud!”¹⁵⁹ The next day, as students are being dropped off, she asks the parent to “cover up a bit” around the children. She gladly obliges, zipping up her hoodie to reveal the word “slut” printed on the front in huge, hot pink letters before wishing Mrs. Howard a good day and strolling out of the classroom. She airs her concerns in the front office and is surprised when Ava also has something to say on the matter:

B: “Ava, I’m surprised. You actually have a problem with this?”

A: “Sure do, but it’s about placement, not the content. The clavicle is such a powerful bone! Why take attention away from it? Keep the tattoos to the ta-tas.

That’s hot!

B: “How could anyone find this ta-ta tattoo hot?! Much less, appropriate.”

A: “Well, it’s a generational thing, Barb. Women her age grew up with Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, and Eve!”

B: “Well, I grew up with Adam and Eve! And maybe all this young woman needs is a little guidance. Heh!”¹⁶⁰

The next day, Barbara hands Krystal a pamphlet advertising a support group for single mothers, which is offensive because she is, in fact, married. Barbara also tells her about an “expletive-free” clothes swap for young professionals that happens monthly, an invitation that Krystal swiftly shuts down because it would undermine the value of her own clothing line of bold,

expletive emblazoned wear. Ava checks in about the issue and, unexpectedly, provides an insight that challenges Barbara's perception of Krystal:

A: "Do you think this child is in danger?"

B: "No."

A: "Okay, well how [are] Tameka's grades and attendance?"

B: "Stellar."

A: "Okay, then what's the real problem, because I'm not hearing anything to worry about."

B: "Okay, I admit it. I misjudged her when I confronted her, but I just don't understand why a grown woman—a *mother*—would act like this!"

A: "Okay, well, let me ask you this: Do you need to?"¹⁶¹

Having considered Ava's question, Barbara apologizes to Krystal for "the assumptions [she] made about [her] character." Krystal accepts the apology, stating that this has happened before: "People are quick to judge, but that's part of the thinking behind my apparel line. You see, one day soon, when people hear 'Forever Bitch Apparel,' they're gonna think about locally made, Black-owned, and sustainable business practices."¹⁶² Going forward, she promises to be more mindful about her tattoo and clothing when in the children's presence.

The conflicts that Barbara has with Ava in "The Fundraiser" and Krystal in "Egg Drop" exemplify respectability politics resulting from interlocking forms of oppression at work in the relationships of Black women. As "a good Christian woman," her behavior is bounded by the expectations of an institution that has historically been weaponized to limit, if not erase, the agency of both women and people of color. Her fear of shame and judgment is evident in the intense anxiety she exhibits about the shame and judgment from Sister Sloss and crew in episode

2.13. It would make sense that that fear of falling short of expectations and dealing with the consequences of that failure drive her strict view of morality and, to some extent, her devout religiosity. In contrast to Ava's experience at the intersection of race and class, Barbara's intersectional oppression sees her marginalized by the mainstream on the basis of race but only willing to confront that marginalization in ways that fit within the confines of her faith. She will not do whatever it takes to get by if it takes breaking the rules outlined in the Bible, but has apparently not been faced with dilemma that requires her to choose between the two. Similarly, in episode 2.8, she alludes to quite a narrow definition of how a woman should perform her femininity and fulfill the responsibility of motherhood. She should not have "Bitch" tattooed across her chest, wear revealing clothing, or use foul language. According to Barbara, any woman and mother doing those things must be deficient in character, be incapable of committing to marriage, and/or be neglectful of her maternal duties. This set of assumptions and the behavior they spur reflect the same harmful rhetoric that has been levied against Black women and mothers for centuries to devastating material consequences.

The resolutions of these conflicts model how not only Black women, but everyone should engage with difference in ways that are actually supportive and show solidarity. At the outset of these episodes, Barbara is problematically steadfast in her narrow conceptions of acceptability. Until she is forced to consider a perspective resulting from a different worldview or set of experiences, that closed-mindedness prevents her from being a truly empathetic, optimally effective teacher, colleague, and friend. Once she sets her biases aside, the path forward is clear.

Conclusion

Formally, *Abbott Elementary* is a mockumentary workplace sitcom set in an urban Philadelphia school. Functionally, it generates a reflective discourse of Blackness that

interrogates and celebrates the range of iterations that constitute it. By appropriating a historically white format and leveraging it to depict stories based in what the creator knows to be real using Black individuals, the show both reflects one facet of our reality back to us and invites us to evaluate our own relationships to the issues explored. In fact, the series, through artful characterization of the minimal whiteness on the show, directly critiques the assumptions of the self-congratulatory liberalism upon which the broadcast mockumentaries that preceded it were based.

Abbott centers three Black women crafted under the authorial supervision of a Black woman. Janine, Ava, and Barbara individually represent different perspectives of how to perform their full personhood as Black women. Collectively, however, they illustrate the scope of oppressive constraints that Black women can face in simply trying to live their lives. Yes, *Abbott Elementary* is a series about teachers at a predominantly Black school in West Philly. It is also a broadly accessible text that complicates and humanizes Black experiences on a medium that has often failed to do so. Its comedic nature is a pedagogical invitation for everyone to consider the human condition through a historically underutilized lens.

CONCLUSION

Niecy Nash-Betts' range as an actress cannot be overstated nor the longevity and diversity of her career denied. She has been a bumbling police officer on the streets of Reno (*Reno 911!*), a sassy host committed to decluttering houses across the United States (*Clean House*), the owner/operator of a money laundering South Florida nail salon (*Claws*), and a Critics' Choice Award-winning neighbor to serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer (*Dahmer*). On September 27, 2022, she returned to fictional law enforcement via Special Agent Simone Clark, a middle-aged guidance counselor turned FBI agent, on *The Rookie: Feds* (*Feds*). The police procedural drama is a spin-off of the popular LAPD-centered series *The Rookie* starring Nathan Fillion, and both he and the lead actress are on the slate of executive producers. The *Feds* ensemble is rounded out by two Black men (Frankie Faison, James Lesure), one Latino man (Felix Solis), one white woman (Britt Robertson), and one white man (Kevin Zegers). With Nash-Betts as the face of the series, *Feds* offers yet another illustration of the way the relationship between Black women and broadcast television is at once evolving and reiterating representative patterns of the past.

Nash-Betts' Simone is certainly a non-traditional protagonist for a series that follows a rookie officer's journey. She is a woman, Black, openly bisexual, a mother, 48 years old, and the daughter of a man wrongfully convicted and unjustly incarcerated for nearly one decade before his exoneration. His abuse at the hands of a corrupt, racist justice system is what inspired her to join the FBI once her children left home. She is a maverick; she will think outside of the box, use her connections, and even defy orders if it means following her sharp instincts and getting to the bottom of a case. Those tactics often include consulting a national network of high school

guidance counselors, tough-love lectures to unrealistically receptive suspects and, comically, fake but shameless flirting. As of the writing of this conclusion, the show's 19 episodes have worked to balance prime time action, group dynamics between lovable misfits, and strengthening a father-daughter relationship with addressing intersectionally oppressive realities that a Black woman in a federal government agency would likely have to confront.

Against the broader history of American broadcast television, *Feds* might seem downright progressive—transgressive, even—especially as compared to, say, *Julia* or *The Cosby Show*. However, given the current industrial context from which this show and the cases explored in the preceding chapters emerge, it is clear that *Feds* is another iteration of strategic response to contemporary televisual trends and practices. A response meant to protect financial interests and profitability while and by appearing invested in the diversification of the broadcast television landscape through Black women-led storytelling on prime time. Considering this young program in relation to the other shows profiled in this project offers a way forward for continuing investigation of Black women's roles in broadcast television.

Notably, this program places a beloved Black actress who has achieved crossover success in the starring law enforcement role on an ensemble procedural, much like *9-1-1*. Like Angela Bassett's Athena, Nash-Betts' Simone depicts a Black woman in role historically tailored for white men but offers acknowledgement and even celebration of her ethnic and gendered identities. Interestingly, Simone's character is necessarily in direct conversation with her white male equivalent, Fillion's John Nolan, on concurrently running predecessor *The Rookie*. The backdoor pilot episode that sets up the spin-off, *The Rookie* episode 4.19, makes it abundantly clear that John and Simone occupy the same narrative space and function. Like Simone, John made a mid-life shift to a career that rarely sees rookies in their 40s. Their separate

characterization and interaction on crossover episodes illustrate a similar optimistic outlook as well. Very early in the series, we learn that John becomes a police officer because he wants to help people, thus he embodies a commitment to the nobility and care we are meant to believe drives the work of policing: “Found myself in the middle of a bank robbery. Helping the people on the inside made me want to do more of it.” Simone expresses a similar sentiment as they begin work together. In the same scene, Simone reveals that she has “always wanted to be an FBI agent, but [she] ended up on an off-ramp when [she] found out [she] was pregnant with the twins. They’re in college now, so time for Mama to finish what she started.”¹⁶³

Later, she tries to justify her pursuit of this dream to her father, Cutty, who is now a leader in the movement to defund the police and is initially upset and embarrassed by his daughter’s involvement with the Bureau:

Cutty: “That’s on you. Joining the Feds, after everything I went through at the hands of law enforcement—“

Simone: “Everything *we* went through.”

C: “Oh, really? Because I was the one incarcerated for a crime I didn’t commit.

Away from you, your mother... Simone, you are on the wrong side of the struggle.

S: “It was an FBI investigation that that got you exonerated!”

C: “It was FBI investigations that tried to compromise Martin, Malcolm, Angela, Black Lives Matter.”

S: “Daddy, a good agent can make more positive change with one case than most people do in a lifetime!”

C: “Oh, what’s that? A quote for the yearbook? Come on. Give me a real reason why you’re doing this!”

S: “Because we make up less than 1%. Black women make up less than 1% of the FBI. Speeches at rallies only do so much! If we want real justice, we need a voice on the inside.”¹⁶⁴

In this exchange, Simone echoes the same individualization of institutional dysfunction that Athena does on *9-1-1*. She is aware of the system’s flaws, sure, but believes the solution is her own integration and intervention in it, not a critical reexamination of its supposed utility. That is why she joins the FBI: to help people, to solve problems, to prevent the injustice her father experienced from befalling someone else, and to change the system from the inside out.

9-1-1 indirectly places Athena in conversation with previous white male versions of the cop protagonist. Because Simone and John exist in the same narrative universe, work together, and share similar outlooks, the attempt to work a Black feminine body and her experiences into a historically white role are particularly evident. Moreover, the acculturative approach to representing Black femininity is directly reflected in Simone’s role as a probationary officer. Her supervisors, Black and Latino men and a white woman, are responsible for molding her into the optimal FBI agent, integrating her into the institution, and guiding her behavior. Of course, her intersectional social position, personal experience with a corrupt justice system, and unconventional approaches to solving problems both challenge the constraints of the institution into which she is acculturating while also eagerly contributing to its function. *Feds* and Simone display somewhat more overt institutional critique but ultimately, like *9-1-1* positions its Black female protagonist as an individual agent of change who desires to and can fix a broken system.

This time, though, she is among a ragtag group that includes people occupying other kinds of marginalized identities.

Given the brief analysis above, *Feds* seems most consistent with the acculturative discourse outlined in the first chapter of this project and, frankly, uncomfortably similar to *9-1-1*. Why not engage in an industrial pluralist strategy and hand the reins over to a Black female showrunner? Why not take on a reflective strategy and explore or, better yet, interrogate and indict the Bureau from multiple Black feminine perspectives? Why, once again, position a Black woman as a committed participant in the same institutions contributing to her oppression without truly giving her the narrative space to process that tension? I believe we can begin to answer these questions by recalling the current state of the television industry. Broadcast television, specifically, is in flux. Already fragmented audiences now have even more abundant choices for viewing, with many abandoning ties to traditional television altogether. Legacy networks like ABC must decide where their priorities lie. On the one hand, audience demographics and expectations are changing and the network must adjust to at least give the illusion of social consciousness. On the other hand, advertisers have a differing set of expectations, one that discourages too wild a deviation from traditional storytelling formats. Like *9-1-1*, the generic constraints of the police procedural allow for Simone's Blackness, femininity, and queerness to be on display but leave no room for a "radical," transgressive, or transformative outlook on American policing, despite fraught and/or abusive relationships between the identities she occupies and the institution she works for. Not that it has been attempted, but the prevailing sentiment for advertisers and networks seems to be that dramatic institutional critique will not sell cars, mops, medicine, etc.

All American: Homecoming and *Abbott Elementary* can play by slightly different rules, but are still subject to the commercial needs of broadcasting. *AAH* is among the latest in a line of Black representational experiments by the odd-network-out, a process made possible by streaming revenues and a well-established young adult drama format. In that case, a Black showrunner gets to make her Black show about a Black school because it makes strategic sense for The CW brand. Much beloved, critically acclaimed, and undeniably innovative, *Abbott* gets 22 minutes per week to tell its heartwarming, reflection-provoking stories. As the creator herself has acknowledged, the show is afforded this space in part because cable streaming shows centering Black stories “proved” to networks that this is a viable investment.

While Black women’s expanding presence in varied aspects of broadcast television is exciting, it is imperative that celebration of that presence does not occlude continued vigilance of the relationship between media representation and Black women’s lived experiences. Like Gray’s concepts from which they originate, the discursive strategies proposed and analyzed in these chapters are tools for examining that relationship, updated for a contemporary situation that sees texts wrestling with the social, political, economic, and cultural movements of the past quarter century or so.

The cases and contexts explored in this project are examples of responses to a changing audience that expects to see themselves represented on the small screen in more ways than just skin color. The Rhimes era saw more Black women on broadcast programs, but at the cost of their cultural specificity in pursuit of “universally” attractive shows. In other words, Black women written in ways that largely ignored their ethnic identities. These plastic representations resulted from the industry “knowing better”: knowing that racial diversity is important, knowing that exclusively white casts would not fly with post-race-minded audiences, and knowing that

including more bodies of color was necessary for maintaining profitability. In terms of televisual representation, this era highlighted the gap between knowing better and doing better. The former is futile to change circumstances without sincere action. Shows like *9-1-1*, *All American: Homecoming*, *Abbott Elementary*, and *Feds*, to varying results and degrees of success, are all at least attempting to *do* better.

On *9-1-1*, trying to do better means tempering the historic white maleness of the procedural drama with Angela Bassett's role as police officer and a tentative exploration of intersectional Black womanhood through Hen. For *All American: Homecoming*, an attempt to do better means repackaging the established young adult drama in an all-Black cast, an HBCU setting, and a Black female showrunner. On *Abbott Elementary*, doing better means reforming the mockumentary so a Black woman can tell stories she knows, develop characters with whom she is familiar, and invite all kinds of viewers to think about systems through a Black feminine lens. Perhaps *The Rookie: Feds* will end up adopting a strategy not discussed in these pages. Maybe Simone will achieve her goal of FBI reform and/or successfully recruit more Black women into the Bureau via a transformation-centered narrative strategy. It is unlikely, but maybe the show will take on a combative frame and have Simone go rogue or something of the like.

Whatever the case may be, *Feds* and other broadcast programs centering Black women's stories deserve popular, scholarly, and critical attention as texts worth examining. In my own research, I intend to maintain focus on Black femininity as it is presented on broadcast television. I encourage others to take up the tools outlined in these chapters and use them to examine discursive strategies used to represent other minoritized experiences. As television scholarship moves forward, it is imperative that we continue to recognize the value of freely available television, investigate and critique the ways it represents Black women, and recognize the

resistive potential of amplifying Black feminine voices on traditional television's lower channels.

In doing so, we may further develop tools for amplifying all kinds of marginalized people's stories, affirming their humanity in the process.

ENDNOTES

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⁶⁰ Warner devotes an entire chapter of *Cultural Politics* to an analysis of Bonnie Bennett and *TVD*, but this brief analysis is based on my own observations as an avid repeat-viewer of the program.

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- ⁶³ Ibid 33.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid. 34-35.
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- ⁶⁶ Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," 37.
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- ⁶⁹ Warner, *Cultural Politics*, 20.
- ⁷⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), 139-167.
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⁸⁸ *9-1-1*, season 2, episode 11, “New Beginnings,” directed by John J. Gray, written by Time Minear and Kristen Reidel, featuring Angela Bassett and Peter Krause, aired March 18, 2019, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/5d2af6f1-89c8-4298-bc86-f762b4a25032>, 00:15:22.

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