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ABSTRACT:

Utilizing a mixed methods approach using quantitative content analysis and rhetorical criticism, I examine Issa Rae's web series *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* and its presence online as a performance of unruliness. The themes of satire, awkwardness, and platform inform my analysis of the series and the conversations that surround it. After a review of the historical, mediated representations of race in the U.S., I argue that Rae navigates constraints on her voice through Crunk Feminism and as an unruly woman. She offers indirect critique of oppressive structures through satire and the performance of awkwardness. Online platforms, like YouTube, contribute to her capability to enact this critique. To this end, I examine not only Rae's performances in *ABG*, but also I conduct quantitative content analysis of *ABG*'s YouTube comments. In this analysis, I focus on expressions of identity, representation, and community. Ultimately, I posit the satirical wielding of awkwardness as a unique educational tactic, which creates space to interrogate stereotypical representations of Black womanhood.

Keywords: awkwardness, satire, Crunk Feminism, YouTube, representation

Emb(Rae)cing Awkward:
Satire, Ambivalence, and Representation on YouTube

by

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B.A. University of Minnesota, 2015

Thesis

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This Awkward Thesis

You blush and *cringe*. Your shoulders round as you shrink and avoid any and all eye contact. Your sternum contracts down into your tailbone as your stomach bottoms out. Everyone has experienced the gut-twisting embarrassment of initiating, participating in, or even viewing an awkward situation.

Imagine you are driving in your car and your favorite “shower song,” the song you yell in the shower when you know nobody is home, comes on the radio. You turn the volume up to 100 and channel your inner [insert your favorite band, pop artist, rapper here]. You are not simply politely singing with an added dash of sass; you are all out air guitaring, drumming into the steering wheel, and singing so loud that you can *actually* hear yourself over your nearly-blown speakers. Then the light turns back to green and you are pulled back into reality. The reality where not only have you behaved far too honestly in front of strangers, but also the reality where your ex is in the lane next to you and *definitely* just saw your performance. And then, you are caught at another red light in the same line up with your ex so close you can feel their eyes turning your skin as red as the fixture forcing this moment to linger.

The scene described above is how we are introduced to J in *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011-2013, henceforth *ABG*). *ABG* is an American comedy web series starring, written, and produced by Issa Rae. In the series Rae plays “J,” a self-proclaimed “awkward Black girl,” finding her place in Black culture(s) while navigating the mainstream, white society. J works at a diet-pill company called “Gutbusters” where, as she puts it, the purpose of her job is to “basically sell bulimia in pill form.”¹ Her interactions with her co-

¹ Issa Rae, *The Job, The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* (YouTube2011), 1:03.

² *Ibid.*, 1:05.

³ Catherine R. Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New

workers are central to many of the narrative constructions in the series. She notes, “I actually wouldn’t mind my job if I didn’t hate everyone.”² Hating *everyone* might be slightly hyperbolic, but through her voiceovers and cutaways, J gives good reason for her distaste in her rather imperceptive and at times racially clueless co-workers. In addition to workplace discourse, *ABG* follows J as she navigates the social foibles that come with “dating while awkward.”

In this thesis, I examine Issa Rae's web series *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* and its presence online as a performance of unruliness. I ask: How can women and feminists, particularly women of color, use online spaces to be seen and heard intra-, cross-, and transculturally? What strategies does Rae use, that might be available to others, to transform and mobilize an emancipatory rhetoric of unruliness? I examine the series and conversations taking place about the series through the themes of satire, awkwardness, and platform. I argue that Rae navigates constraints on her voice using awkwardness and the rhetoric of unruliness as her tactics. She offers indirect critique of oppressive structures through satire and the performance of awkwardness. Online platforms, like YouTube, contribute to her capability to enact this critique. I examine not only Rae’s performances in *ABG*, but also comment and platform online discourses, which are both inextricably linked to the series through platform interface. I synthesize the unruly woman, originally theorized by Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, and Crunk Feminism, theorized by the Crunk Feminist Collective, as my framework for critique in a rhetorical analysis of *ABG*. And I ultimately posit awkwardness a unique educational tactic of unruliness, and specifically Rae’s enactment of Crunk Feminism.

In what follows, after a brief contextualization the history of mediated representations of Blackness and of the discourses taking place during the air of *ABG*, I examine salient literature on digital platforms, satire, and unruliness. I then theorize awkwardness as a trait of

² Ibid., 1:05.

contemporary U.S. cultural logic, a trope used in cringe comedy, and a tool used within the paradigm of Crunk Feminism. I conclude this chapter with an overview of the subsequent chapters research and examination of my research methods. I want to make a note that I intentionally spotlight the voices of scholars of color who have taught me so much through their work, and also about my own position as a white woman at a predominately white, private, academic institution. In other words, rather than paraphrasing their works, I often and mindfully aim to retain the original intent and context of their work through direct quote.

Historical Signification of Race in the U.S.

The years preceding the airing of *ABG* featured a national conversation on race and ethnicity, a conversation that attempted to deny the ongoing reality of racism. Catherine Squires notes that in the mid-2000s, “post-racial” became the term used to define the United States’ racial landscape and that “post-racial” commentary was catalyzed after the 2008 election of President Barack Obama, the United States’ first African American president.³ Squires defines post-racial ideology as “an already-achieved multicultural nation [that] draws upon neoliberal ideologies” and its “investment in individual-level analysis and concern with individual freedoms.”⁴ Notably, “Post-racial discourses obfuscate institutional racism and blame continuing racial inequalities on individuals who make poor choices for themselves or their families.” Post-civil rights, “colorblind” racial beliefs motivate post-racial discourses. In other words, actions that might otherwise be perceived as racist are trivialized as a problem with the individual, regardless of that individual’s race, class, gender, ethnicity, ability, or other intersecting markers of identity and power.

³ Catherine R. Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

Squires sees mediated representations of Blackness as a powerful circuit of post-racial ideology. Squires states that despite the wide gaps in wealth and healthcare distribution, police profiling, and “mind-boggling incarceration rates for blacks and Latinos/as [...] the media continue to churn out films and shows that feature scores of people of color living discrimination-free lives.”⁵ While the media are by no means the only place where post-racial ideology manifested in the mid-2000s, the images of African Americans on these screens indubitably indicate a struggle over the signification of Blackness. Additionally, the proliferation of negative, yet “innocuously colorblind” representations of Black people was an exigency of Issa Rae’s creation, as I will explore later in this chapter.

Central to understanding *ABG* are the historical struggles over significations of Blackness. In their seminal piece *Racial formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1980s*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain that racial formation theory to emphasize “the social nature of race, the absence of any essential racial characteristics, the historical flexibility of racial meanings and categories, the conflictual nature of race at both the 'micro-' and 'macro-social' levels, and the irreducible political aspect of racial dynamics.”⁶ Omi and Winant observe how religious, scientific, political, and economic institutions and discourses have defined race through “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed into political struggle”⁷ in the United States. They further define race as an arbitrary “concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.”⁸ They critique attempts to “get beyond” race, or discourses of “color blindness” that proliferated United States politics after the 1960s, as discourses that view race as something

⁵ Ibid., 4-5.

⁶ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 4.

⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁸ Ibid., 55.

fixed, unchanging, and essentialist.⁹ Instead they suggest, “we should think of race as an element of social structure rather than as an irregularity within it; we should see race as a dimension of human representation rather than an illusion.”¹⁰ Omi and Winant advance race as human-created and human-perpetuated rather than a “made up” construct without social grounding.

In the United States, “Race is indeed a pre-eminently socio-historical concept.”¹¹ Dating back to slavery, race has been a socially determined construction, which identifies a person as “higher” or “lower” on a cultural hierarchy based on their phenotypical signification.¹² Omi and Winant interrogate the Black/white color line as “rigidly defined and enforced. White is seen as a ‘pure’ category. Any racial intermixture makes one ‘nonwhite.’”¹³ Whiteness is naturalized, rendered as normal or invisible, and the “nonwhite” is “other” and pathologized. Herein indicates the origins of the United States’ dominant hegemonic understanding of race and racial formation.

Omi and Winant’s discussion of the struggle over the signification of race boils down to the struggle for hegemony. Originally described in his Prison Notebooks, Antonio Gramsci referred to hegemony as the dominant ideology crafted by the ruling class.¹⁴ It is naturalized into our everyday actions and thus left unchecked and masked by a manufactured, “de facto” consent. However, where Gramsci’s theories of ideology differ with hegemony is in the fact that multiple hegemonies can exist simultaneously. The existence of multiple competing hegemonies allows for the resistance of dominant, ruling class ideology. Drawing from Gramsci’s theories of hegemony, Omi and Winant state that the creation of social conceptions of race are the creation

⁹ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹¹ M. Omi and H. Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (Routledge, 1994), 11.

¹² Ibid., 11.

¹³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴ Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, vol. [1st]. (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

of a common sense; they are the creation of hegemony.¹⁵ Omi and Winant contend that the creation of “common sense” in the United States has largely been constructed on dictatorial racial rule, consisting of “racial division, and of racial signification and identity formation.”¹⁶ In other words, while several hegemonies can coexist, ruling groups craft dominant hegemonies through cultural productions of common sense. This common sense is created through “education, the media, religion, folk wisdom, etc.,” which not only construct common sense understandings of racial signifiers and identities, but also perpetuate them into a naturalized worldview.

Popular culture, in particular, plays an essential role in establishing the interpretation of social signifiers. Though there are several definitions of what popular culture is and its role in society, in this project I observe it as a sphere wherein a multitude of voices, whether dominant or “folk,” converge to transport understandings of politics, society, identity, and agency. In terms of its role and political importance, cultural studies theorist, Stuart Hall states:

Popular culture is one of the sites where the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony rises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply ‘expressed’. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it.¹⁷

In other words, Hall viewed popular culture as an arena where hegemony, or common sense, was fought for, established, and contested. Pointedly, Hall views popular culture as a space where all

¹⁵ Omi and Winant, 67.

¹⁶ Ibid., 67.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstruction ‘the Popular’,” in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 239.

voices can be heard, and thus he views it as a socialist discourse. Moreover, a voice in popular culture is, in Hall's words, the means of establishing hegemony and maintaining it. Popular culture holds an access to power unlike high culture and the political sphere.

Considering this definition of popular culture and its importance to non-dominant identities, the ability to constitute representations of race, ethnicity, class, and gender to a mass mediated audience is paramount to establishing counter-hegemony and ideological signifiers of identity. In *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, Herman Gray examines the social production of Blackness on television in the 1980s. Gray reviews the eras of televisual representation of Blackness beginning in the 1950s. He argues "that our contemporary moment continues to be shaped discursively by representations of race and ethnicity that began in the formative years of television."¹⁸ Beginning with the 1950s, Gray addresses "programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy*, *Beulah*, *The Jack Benny Show*, and *Life with Father* [which] presented blacks in stereotypical and subservient roles whose origins lay in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popular forms... These stereotypes were necessary for the representation and legitimation of a racial order built on racism and white supremacy."¹⁹ Gray establishes how these original representations crafted a hegemonic understanding of Blackness to white and nonwhite viewers alike. While paying mind to the fact that African Americans often read these programs through an oppositional gaze, finding humor in their absurdity, Gray notes, "The social issues, political positions, and cultural alliances that shows such as *Amos 'n' Andy* organized and crystallized, then, were powerful and far-reaching in their impact, so much so that I believe that our contemporary representations remain in dialogue with and only now have begun to transcend this

¹⁸ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

formative period.”²⁰ Forty-five years after their debut on mass broadcasted platforms, these images and stereotypes were only beginning to be transformed and challenged through the introduction of Black producers and writers on film sets.

After examining the demographic landscape of creative executives in television industry from the 1980s, Gray asserts that Black writers and producers had little social influence on sets with white creative executives.²¹ Nonetheless, Black creative executives on sets were making cultural moves to alter the broadcasted signifiers of Blackness. Gray also notes that with heightened visibility of Black creative executives came heightened expectations “of black audiences and critics.”²² In other words, although the diversification in creative roles resulted in a diversification in the storylines of African American characters, there was still a struggle for the signification of Blackness even when Black, predominantly male, creative executives were calling the shots.²³ The struggle over signification sustains today in blog posts, academic journals, on Twitter, and in interpretive communities.

The struggle over signification is closely related to the struggle over representation. Central to my conceptual framework and analysis is Black feminist thought, its concern for lived experiences of women, and praxis of resistance. Patricia Hill Collins notes that “for U.S. Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women’s survival.”²⁴ Therefore, self-definition *enacts* resistance and *creates* new theory around Black womanhood. The contemporary significance and demand of Black women’s self-

²⁰ Ibid., 76.

²¹ Ibid., 71-72.

²² Ibid., 73.

²³ Ibid., 73.

²⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Rev. 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 100.

definition is warranted by oppressive, stereotypical representations of Black womanhood manifesting in slavery and perpetuated through the 1950s to more contemporary representations.²⁵ Collins makes ideological ties between contemporary and historical understanding of controlling Black women's representation: "The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination."²⁶ In other words, as expressed above, controlling the image of Black womanhood entailed the creation of a "common sense" or hegemony.

Defining all controlling images of Black womanhood, complete with their evolutions, iterations, and alterations is past the scope of this project. However, here I note a few historical and contemporary stereotypes of Black womanhood. The original controlling image in U.S. public memory is that of the mammy,²⁷ a robust, asexual, "faithful, obedient domestic servant,"²⁸ created as a means to justify the oppression of Black women as slaves committed to domestic service.²⁹ Next, Collins notes the image of the matriarch – a dominating, and therefore emasculating African American mother – was created in order to explain the societal inequality experienced in African American communities.³⁰ In recent years, the mammy and the matriarch have evolved into iterations of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN (SBW), the silent, strong woman who swallows the strife of the community and, through self-sacrificial deed, holds the community together.³¹ Closely related to the SBW is the BlackSuperWoman, an image of the

²⁵ Ibid., 5.

²⁶ Ibid., 72.

²⁷ Ibid., 40, 72.

²⁸ Ibid., 72.

²⁹ Ibid., 72.

³⁰ Ibid., 74-78.

³¹ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

Black career woman committed to her family, her career, and maintaining the dignity and composure of her community.³² BlackSuperWoman is similar to the SBW in that they both rely on the Black woman's silence in the face of her (community's) struggle to maintain the status quo; they require self-sacrifice on the part of Black women. However, where the BlackSuperWoman differs is that her commitment to her career and self-promotion is seen as selfish and a reason for her home life and community's struggle. Moreover, BlackSuperWoman and SBW are perpetuated and maintained through yet another controlling image of Black womanhood: the Angry Black Woman (ABW). The ABW gets its tropical origins in the character (and trope) Sapphire from the television show *Amos 'n' Andy*, as an emasculating, "loud, stubborn and overbearing"³³ woman. Tropes and representations such as Sapphire, the Angry Black Woman, and cultural expectations of SBW delegitimize or shame Black women's anger, forcing or imploring them to tighten their jaw.³⁴

These controlling images are not only important in regard to understanding how Black womanhood has been manipulated through dominant imagery, but also in practical, psychological experiences of Black women. In their study on how media representations influence self-perception and self-valuation of Black university-age women, Jerald et al. note,

Although the characteristics of the SBW are often praised by Black women for highlighting positive features of Black womanhood in contrast to ... Sapphire, the SBW ideal also has detrimental consequences for Black women's health. For example, Black women high in SBW endorsement tend to report more emotional avoidance or suppression and engage in binge eating. Qualitative research also finds that Black women

³² Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso, 2015).

³³ Imani M. Cheers, *The Evolution of Black Women in Television: Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 3.

³⁴ Rachel Alicia Griffin, "I Am an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance," *Women's Studies in Communication* 35, no. 2 (2012), 143.

who are more accepting of the SBW ideal are at greater risk for depression, suffer from role strain, and deny themselves essential forms of self-care.³⁵

In other words, these images, stereotypes, and representations have both psychological and material effects on those who are being (mis-)represented.

Echoing Hall, Gray, Omi and Winant's earlier claims on the effects of popular culture on dominant hegemony, Collins asserts:

As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new ones... [and therefore] African-American women's status as outsiders becomes the point from which other groups define their normality.³⁶

In other words, Collins is pointing here to the lasting impact those in executive roles of media industries have had on cultural (white) imagination. Additionally, she suggests that the creation and manipulation of these images also perpetuates a raced, classed, and gendered hierarchy. However this is not to say that Black women have not had agency at any point in their own representation. Beretta Smith-Shomade and Imani Cheers examined how Black women enact their agency in their respective pieces on Black women's roles in production of mediated messages. Moreover, Gwendolyn Pough and the Crunk Feminist Collective have also examined how women of color enact agency in relation to Black and popular cultures.

³⁵ Morgan C. Jerald et al., "Subordinates, Sex Objects, or Sapphires? Investigating Contributions of Media Use to Black Students' Femininity Ideologies and Stereotypes About Black Women," *Journal of Black Psychology* 43, no. 6 (2017), 611-612.

³⁶ Hill Collins, 69-70.

In *Shaded Lives*, Smith-Shomade examines the ways in which Black actresses have navigated and negotiated their performances of subjectivity in a mediascape that repeatedly insists on their objectification.³⁷ Smith-Shomade cites situation comedy as one of the spaces wherein Black women have agentive subjectivity. After examining major televisual sitcoms of the 1980's through the early 2000's, Smith-Shomade comes to the conclusion that:

The Black women presented in these comedies explored roles and ideologies heretofore rarely seen. They were indeed funny in many cases. But, once again, the greater proportion of Black women's representations remained in the supporting, mammyfied, and one-dimensional capacities.³⁸

Smith-Shomade concludes that Black feminist theory calls for “opportunity, recognition, and subjecthood—in other words, African-American women’s centering in sitcom narratives.”³⁹ I contend that one answer to Smith-Shomade’s, and more broadly Black Feminist Theory, call for the centering of Black women in comedies is through the presence of Black women not only on screen, but also in creative executive roles. As Gray notes, the predominance of Black men in creative executive roles did little to promote and diversify the representations of Black womanhood.⁴⁰ Cheers traces the rise of African American women in creative executive roles beginning in the 1950's to 2016.⁴¹ She found, unsurprisingly, that with the presence of Black women in creative executive roles, representations of Black women became more diverse and were less subject to fall into tropes of stereotypes. Additionally, with the advent of the open Internet and easily accessible recording technology, audiences are now able to be their own

³⁷ Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, *Shaded Lives: African-American Women and Television* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁰ Gray, 51-52.

⁴¹ Cheers, 1, 23-25.

executive creators. This evolution opens opportunities for marginalized people to center themselves and their stories.

One point of divergence from prior works on representation I aim to make here is on the topic of prescribing positive or negative definition to a series. In other words, Herman Gray makes a point of stating that the diversification of representation was not a cure-all. Much of Gray's work aimed to categorize the representations of Blackness as positive or negative. While I agree with his expression that diversification does not cure everything, my thesis pointedly jettisons from this type of critique in order to observe Rae's representation as ambivalent, evolving, and messy. In other words, my purpose here is not to declare *ABG* as a progressive or stagnant text, but rather to examine it as a form of testifying Issa Rae's truth in identity. Rather than positing the political work of *ABG* existing exclusively in the text, I suggest that its politics resides in its ambivalent representations that are unconcerned with respectability politics. In this way, I suggest that *ABG* embraces the Crunk feminist praxis of embracing ambivalence, which will be explored throughout this thesis.

Crunk Feminism

In *Check it While I Wreck It*, Pough examines how women in Hip-Hop culture “bring wreck” as a rhetorical tactic of resistance and consciousness raising in the public sphere. Pough defines “bringing wreck” as “a rhetorical act that has close ties to various other speech acts that are often linked to Black womanhood... Each of these actions have simultaneously been embraced by some Black women as a marker of unique Black womanhood and renounced as the stereotypical Black woman stance by others.”⁴² Pough discusses the idea of the cipher, “a place

⁴² Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 78.

where people gather to create knowledge and exchange information. To cipher means to understand, to figure out. In Hip-Hop the cipher is built when people shaped and build knowledge together.”⁴³ Pough explains how Black women have learned special skills and ways of knowing that work to convey a unique perspective in the public sphere.⁴⁴ Hip-Hop feminists create theory and knowledge through their work and make use of the privileges they are given:

Black women make use of whatever medium or genre is at their disposal and best conveys the issue they want to address. They keep their cipher moving through time in this way because the message can be enclosed in any kind of venue, it is enclosed in a quote, submerged in the story, or conveyed with that certain look or expression that Black women have made an art form.⁴⁵

Pough then moves to analyze tropes of Black womanhood (e.g. Black Superwoman and Strong Black Woman) and how these tropes subvert and reconfigure older tropes (e.g. the Mammy, or Sapphire).⁴⁶ Because of this perpetual re-inscription of controlling images, Pough makes salient:

The need to struggle against stereotyped images is still present. Black women from the Hip-Hop generation have found ways to deal with these issues within the larger public sphere and the counter-public sphere of Hip-Hop by bringing wreck to stereotyped images through their continued use of expressive cultures.⁴⁷

The resistance taken in popular culture to these controlling images and discourses of oppression are inherently political and must be married to Black feminist thought.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 71.

Expanding generationally from the work of Pough came the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC). CFC is a community of Black, activist scholars focused on forming community, criticism, and theory within and outside of academic avenues.⁴⁹ In their mission statement, CFC articulates,

Crunk feminism is the animating principle of our collective work together and derives from our commitment to feminist principles and politics and also from our unapologetic embrace of those new cultural resources, which provide of offer the potential for resistance. Crunk(ness) is our mode of resistance that finds its particular expression in the rhetorical, cultural, and intellectual practices of a contemporary generation.⁵⁰

In other words, CFC performs cultural criticism to “bring wreck” to those discourses of oppression within and outside of Hip-Hop culture. It is a new generation of Hip-Hop generation feminists who provide support, enact resistance, craft Black feminist theory through lived experience, and produce and disseminate (a praxis of) criticism through the media provided. Crunk is a praxis of centering the perspective of oppressed, typically women of color, and unapologetically pointing out the absurdity of those factors that work to oppress them. However, what distinguishes Crunk Feminism from Black feminism lies in its name. As a portmanteau of “crazy” and “drunk,” *Crunk* feminist praxis refracts the craziness of oppressive ideologies. However, Crunk feminists do not stop and this refraction; like your aunt at the holidays who is five drinks in, a Crunk feminist unabashedly divulges all the buried truths they have experience because of this oppression. Their Crunk feminist enactment, then, centers their point of view and brings wreck to the status quo.

⁴⁹ Crunk Feminist Collective, *The Crunk Feminist Collection* ed. Susana Morris Brittney Cooper and Robin Boylorn (The Feminist Press, 2017), xvii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

In their essay “Ten Crunk Commandments of Reinvigorating Hip Hop Studies,” CFC set out commandments, upon which their feminist praxis hinges. While their title alludes to a “narrow” focus of Hip-Hop studies, it actually encompasses a wide net of pop culture studies. They also provide a guide for how others, academic or not, can do this Black feminist work. Notably, the CFC call attention to the affordances and constraints of doing critical cultural analysis in regard to technology, community, positionality, history, and the messy ambivalence inherent in mediated representations. I will return to Crunk feminism in my discussion of the unruly woman below. However, important to note here is the ways Black women and women of color are resisting, forming counter-hegemony, and shaping community through their own vernaculars. Technology, grounded theory, history, community, the merging of myriad positionalities, and ambivalence coexist in the beautifully chaotic space known as the World Wide Web.

The “Ten Crunk Commandments” is both a paradigm from which I construct this project, and also a framework through which and a product from which *ABG* functions. In other words, when producing this thesis, I worked to enact my own Crunk politics by centering more marginalized voices (commenters) and following the commandments CFC provides, which I will explain in my methods section below. Moreover, I also want to note that I view the work Issa Rae is doing with *ABG* as its own type of critical public pedagogy through her use of satire, unruliness, and awkwardness. Pointedly, below I argue that satire/unruliness and awkwardness become tools in Issa Rae’s Crunk feminist belt.

Online Spaces

In the past people have looked to the writings of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston, the voices of Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, and the rhymes of Queen Latifah,

Erykah Badu, and Roxanne Shanté for expressions and theory on Black feminist thought. Today, people do not need to go to a jazz club, purchase a book, or acquire a mix tape. They simply have to open their web browser and share it to any social media platform. Moreover, an artist, writer, or performer does not need to go through an agent or publishing house. With the Internet, blogs, and YouTube as a broadcasting/SNS, people have an ease of access and ease of distribution of more diverse representations.

Early claims about the Internet posited it as a space where women would remain invisible and absent, especially Black women, as it was not a space that was created for their self-expression. Based on surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center starting from 2000 to 2016, Americans are using the Internet more today than they ever have before. Namely, 86 percent of adult Americans use the Internet on a daily basis.⁵¹ However, in their research on smartphone dependency, the Pew Research Center found that younger adults, non-whites, and lower income Americans tend to be more smartphone dependent.⁵² And, as it may come as no surprise, 86 percent of 18-29 year olds in the U.S. use social media.⁵³ Moreover, 72 percent of U.S. women use social media, as compared to 66 percent of men.⁵⁴ All this is to say that young, nonwhite women are more likely to use their smartphones to attain and disseminate information. A three to fifteen minute YouTube video, which one could easily watch and share on social media waiting in line at the grocery store or on the bus in the morning, is arguably an ideal way to spread Black feminist thought vis-à-vis its practical usage.

⁵¹ "Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet," ed. Pew Research Center (Washington D.C. 2017).

⁵² "Mobile Fact Sheet," ed. Pew Research Center (Washington D.C.: @pewinternet, 2017).

⁵³ "Social Media Fact Sheet," ed. Pew Research Center (Washington D.C.: @pewinternet, 2017)., Followed 80 percent of 30-49 year olds, concluded with a stark drop of 64 percent of 50-64 year olds and 34 percent of senior citizens.

⁵⁴ "Social Media Fact Sheet."

Drawing from the work of Jacqueline Bobo and Patricia Hill Collins, Kirsten Warner exposes how Black women intervene in dominant paradigms to produce alternative interpretations of media texts.⁵⁵ However, the production of Black feminist thought is not the only output of these audiences. As Warner notes:

This [Black women's] fandom is not only about the pleasures of feeling in racially specific gaps or engaging in the fantasy of desirability. It is also about being able to call out en masse when their objects of love and identification are threatened in a way that symbolically challenges their own positionalities.⁵⁶

Black women use online spaces to add nuance to characters' backstories or portrayals or "talk back" when they feel they are misrepresented. In doing so, they enact a type of public pedagogy that disrupts dominant paradigms, which have historically enacted ideological violence through the creation of tropical and stereotypical representations that define(d) Black womanhood (e.g. StrongBlackWoman, BlackSuperWoman, AngryBlackWoman). Furthermore, in this disruption, Black women enact Black feminist praxis of self-definition and self-valuation.⁵⁷

Social media not only facilitate connection and community, but it is an outlet of discovery as well. As mentioned above, social media have allowed Black women to resist former representations of Black womanhood. They have also given space for Black women to enact their own self-representation and self-definition through responses to dominant representations. As explained by Collins, "Black women engaged in reclaiming and constructing Black women's knowledges often point to the politics of suppression that affect their projects." While there is an abundance of scholarship on how the Internet, particularly Twitter, has been shaped to facilitate

⁵⁵ Kristen J. Warner, "Abc's Scandal and Black Women's Fandom," (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 47.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁷ Hill Collins. Griffin.

cultural identification, connection, and subaltern ideologies, rhetoric scholar LaToya Sawyer observes Black Feminist Twitter in particular as a site of intergenerational and intercultural education. Sawyer observes social media sites YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr as spaces wherein Black women's knowledges offer insight to dominant ideology and interpretation. In this thesis, I examine YouTube, Awkward Black Girl's webpage, and Twitter as locations wherein Black feminist education and expression of alternative hegemonic discourses.

Digital publics are the result of the Internet's ease of connectivity. In early examinations on the digital divide, or the divide of access to the Internet and thus open knowledge sources, studies used deficit models, or models that examine those who do not have and those who do, to argue that people without access to technology would not gain access to digital or technical literacies, thereby placing them at a societal disadvantage.⁵⁸ However in the last decade and a half this divide has drastically narrowed: "Findings on Internet use and social media participation by the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that African Americans and women are among the top users of social media sites. African Americans' mobile Web use has more than doubled in the past several years."⁵⁹ Brock's recent study on Black Twitter shows that typically one in ten African Americans access Twitter daily, a rate four times that of white Americans.⁶⁰ He suggests that Twitter may map discursively onto Black discourses as Twitter, and the Blogosphere more broadly, allow for performativity, spectacle, and publicness – hallmarks of Henry Louis Gates' signifyin'.⁶¹ In Sawyer's tracing of Black women's online spaces, she notes a practice of signifyin(g) and performativity deployed to enact Pough's rhetorical tactic of

⁵⁸ André Brock, "Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis," *New Media & Society* (2016).

⁵⁹ LaToya Lydia Sawyer, "'Don't Try and Play Me Out!': The Performances and Possibilities of Digital Black Womanhood" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017), 13.

⁶⁰ André Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012), 530-531.

⁶¹ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

“bringing wreck.”⁶² Sawyer examines the way that Black women engage the rhetorical tactic of “bringing wreck” to speak back to controlling images and claim their productive anger.

Theorizations on the digital divide in the early 2000s examined discourses of “appropriate,” meaning using platforms as they were intended rather than restructuring the platform to suit the user’s needs, and “informed” usage of the World Wide Web. Brock notes this definition and examination of the digital divide as an unambiguous ascription of Western, masculine, and tied to Eurocentric ideological notions of civility and rationality. In another study, André Brock, Lynette Kvasny, and Kayla Hales find that Black women’s interaction online disrupt and alter Western understandings of “civilization,” “rationality,” and “objectivity,” which early theories of the (White, positivist, masculinist) Internet demanded, by garnering technical and cultural capital on Twitter, in comment sections of blogs, and in their own blogging practices.⁶³ Brock, Kvasny, and Hales determine that Black women’s technical capital, accrued through online discourse, translates into cultural capital, which they have long been denied in the United States public sphere. Their findings illustrate how Black women use popular culture and new media affordances to lend credence to their voices and experiences.

Black women perform a sort of *social* capital on YouTube and other Social Networking Sites. As Michael Strangelove writes, “The Internet also constructs women as online producers of meaning.”⁶⁴ Strangelove continues by demonstrating that “women of YouTube are teaching themselves to speak out against sexism”⁶⁵ while building networks of support and friendship.⁶⁶ This sentiment is echoed in Sawyer’s work, which examines Twitter as a space wherein Black

⁶² Sawyer, 20.

⁶³ Andre Brock, Lynette Kvasny, and Kayla Hales, "Cultural Appropriations of Technical Capital," *Information, Communication & Society* 13, no. 7 (2010).

⁶⁴ Michael Strangelove, *Watching Youtube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People* (Buffalo [N.Y.]; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 98.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

women acquire social capital by signifying, performing knowledge within their online communities,⁶⁷ and act as “mentors” to young Black women.⁶⁸ “This inter-generational learning is vital for Black women and girls because of the close connection of their literacy, meaning-making, and identity.”⁶⁹ Sawyer expresses how these mentorships develop from “Black girls’ literacies.”⁷⁰ These literacies are not simply understood through traditional notions of being able to read the words, but also, and perhaps more importantly, how Black women and girls “read and make meaning of social contexts.”⁷¹ Therefore, the mentorships mentioned above aid in the crafting of a personal identity in addition to performing critical public pedagogy.

Understanding Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), which refers to networked interaction on the Internet via instant messaging, social networking, email, etc., through the lens of Black feminist thought provides a more nuanced understanding of not only Internet usage, but also how Black women communicate, organize, and resist in the age of the Internet. As explained above, Black communities and Black women not only respond to mainstream media discourses, but they also actively work to influence and engage broadcast media. Black women connect with each other to create counterpublics, such as Black Feminist Twitter. Black Feminist Twitter has become a place where Black women feminists and women of color feminists can convene, learn from each others’ Black girl literacies, and create counterpublics that resist the status quo and enact public pedagogy. Black women use social media outlets, such as Twitter and YouTube, to galvanize and “talk back” when they feel the threat of erasure.⁷²

⁶⁷ Sawyer, 16.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 104.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁷¹ Ibid., 90.

⁷² Sarah J. Jackson and Sonia Banaszczyk, “Digital Standpoints: Debating Gendered Violence and Racial Exclusions in the Feminist Counterpublic,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 40, no. 4 (2016).

The Unruly Woman

Originally theorized by Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, the unruly woman is invulnerable to patriarchal claims on her because she is the “prototype of woman as subject.”⁷³ The unruly woman uses satire as her weapon of choice. Therefore, before I define the unruly woman, I here wish to review literature on satire and then define the rhetoric of unruliness as a satirical tactic. Satire operates by denaturalizing formerly assumed beliefs. It places an object of analysis outside of its natural habitat or disrupts its naturalized understanding through a humorous attack, otherwise known as the application of a comic frame.⁷⁴ “Satire is dedicated to exposing human folly”⁷⁵ through the use of humor, irony, parody, ridicule, and exaggeration. Satire deploys these tactics to draw attention to, and often criticize, societal illogic, vices, and ideological or political absurdity. Though it often uses humor as a tactic, satire does not always have to be humorous. One might not laugh at a satirical bit, but nonetheless, if successful, satire will provide the viewer a new insight on social and societal plights.

Charged humor,⁷⁶ a form of satire focused on identity, creates “the tears in the fabric of our beliefs.”⁷⁷ Charged humor centralizes the identity of the comic (and viewers), the struggles associated with their positionality as a “second-class citizen,” and “rallies listeners around some focal point be that cultural, corporeal, or racial/ethnic similarities.”⁷⁸ Most pointedly, charged

⁷³ Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, 1st ed. (Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 1995), 31.

⁷⁴ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History* (New York, NY: The New republic, 1937), 307.

⁷⁵ Sophia A. McClennen and Remy M. Maisel, *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?: Mockery and American Politics*, vol. First (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 108.

⁷⁶ While there are definitional debates between satire and charged humor, for the purpose of this thesis, I look specifically at satire that is also considered charged humor. Therefore, charged humor and satire are used synonymously throughout the thesis.

⁷⁷ Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

humor “hinges on the practice of enacting cultural citizenship.”⁷⁹ In other words, charged humor steps into the liminal space of being regarded as a second-class citizen, and therefore not a full, or ideal, citizen in a formally recognized sense, and creates a sense of community through the use and knowingness of cultural citizenship. This concept will resurface in my next two chapters, specifically in regard to the creation of cultural citizenship. Charged humor shines a light on the “disparities between the promises of citizenship and the fulfillment of those promises,”⁸⁰ an idea that will become salient in my discussion of awkwardness.

Charged humor and satire have played a foundational role in African American resistance.⁸¹ Bambi Haggins traces African American humor in the post-soul (post-civil rights) public sphere, noting that Black laughter and Black humor took a turn after civil rights: “The civil rights movement marked the beginning of black humor’s potential power as an unabashed tool for social change, for the unfiltered venting of cultural and political anger, and for the annunciation of blackness.”⁸² Haggins continues to observe that Black comics have often been able to get crowds laughing while simultaneously slipping sociocultural critique into their work.⁸³ In her analysis of “Performing Marginality,” Joanne Gilbert examines how satirists enact their marginality. Gilbert notes, satire:

is unique in many ways. Humor functions as a sort of judo rhetoric—like the martial art, humor uses an opponent against him- or herself ... Humor humanizes by humiliating ...

⁷⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁸¹ Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007). Smith-Shomade.

⁸² Haggins, 4.

⁸³ Ibid., 6.

the target is exposed and vulnerable, power relations are subverted, and the marginal may temporarily transcend their social conditions.⁸⁴

The power of satire is in its ability to, even momentarily, upset power dynamics in order to educate and galvanize, which I will return to in my theorization of awkwardness. This disruption of power and (momentary) subversion is the rhetoric of unruliness, which I will return to after an examination of the unruly woman.

To be clear, the unruly woman and satire go hand-in hand. The unruly woman utilizes the satirical rhetoric of unruliness, through a complete refusal and subversion of dominant ideology. In other words, she denies, as Patricia Hill Collins noted, dominant hegemony's work of objectifying non-dominant markers that would relegate her as "lesser" in the social hierarchy.⁸⁵ Karlyn notes the unruly woman is identifiable by eight key characteristics:

(1) The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, man ... unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place. (2) Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites. (3) Her speech is excessive, in quality, content, or tone. (4) She makes jokes, or laughs at herself. (5) She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender. (6) She may be old or a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are also considered grotesque. (7) Her behavior is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than that of the femme fatale. ... (8) She's associated

⁸⁴ The field of comedy and literary studies lack consensus on when to use humor versus comedy versus satire versus parody. Therefore, these terms and their usage can differ from piece to piece. To avoid any confusion over terms, and to avoid definitional disputes, I want to make note that the manner in which Gilbert deploys the term "humor" maps onto my definition of satire; Joanne R. Gilbert, "Performing Marginality : Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique," *Humor in life and letters series* (2004), 14.

⁸⁵ Hill Collins, 70-71.

with dirt, liminality (threshold, borders, or margins), and taboo.⁸⁶

The unruly woman uses the grotesque and excess(ive body) to subvert and disrupt the status quo. A grotesque body is juxtaposed to the classic, bourgeois body, which is contained, concealed, and reinforces barriers of difference and distance to the outside world.⁸⁷ In contrast, the grotesque body is open; it exposes and exaggerates corporeal processes, excretions, and orifices.⁸⁸ The grotesque body is located in Bakhtin's theorizations of lower stratum of the body, which is associated with taboos surrounding filth, looseness, and open orifices.⁸⁹ Karlyn notes, "All marginalized groups are vulnerable to pollution taboos that stigmatize them as less than human and their bodies as 'dirty,' 'foul,' 'greasy,'"⁹⁰ an idea I return to in my discussion of race and ethnicity below.

Through Bakhtin's cartwheel effect, or by metaphorically performing a cartwheel, the unruly woman enacts carnival, or the embodiment of the carnivalesque in which the existing hierarchical structures are subverted or sent into disarray by wielding chaos and/or humor. The unruly woman performing carnivalesque reconstitutes the lower/upper stratum's hierarchy; the buttocks replace the face and the anus takes the place of a mouth.⁹¹ Theoretically, this cartwheel suggests that the upper, cerebral stratum, that which is associated when men, is no longer the favored. The cartwheel constitutes the "woman on top." Therefore, the woman's excess of the mouth, body, and vagina are praised, as it is an enactment of her status. In action, the unruly woman eats too much and speaks too much, indicating a loss of control of the mouth, which

⁸⁶ Karlyn, 31.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 33. Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, vol. 1st (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 100. Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass U6: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 26.

⁸⁸ Karlyn., 33, Mizejewski, 1st., 100, Russo.

⁸⁹ Mizejewski, 1st., 100

⁹⁰ Karlyn., 42

⁹¹ Mizejewski, 1st., 100, Bakhtin., 373

signifies her excess. The woman on top – the unruly woman, this crunk feminist – refuses the consumption of victimized laughter, but rather is laughing herself, thereby hurling the threat back at her assailant.

While I do not and cannot argue against the claim that embodying the unruly woman is a useful and productive tactic of resistance, it is worthwhile to note *which* bodies benefit from this disruption and which bodies do not. In other words, I have a few reservations in its applicability to bodies that are always already born into unruliness. While I agree that all women's bodies carry a type of unruliness because of their "openness" or "leakiness" as Bakhtin and Karlyn explain, it is notable that the white woman's body has historically been used as the exemplary form of how to perform "ideal" femininity. As Collins notes,

According to the cult of true womanhood that accompanied the traditional family ideal, 'true' women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Propertied White women and those of the emerging middle class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues...Unlike the controlling images developed for middle-class White women, the controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance.⁹²

In other words, in order to resist the "contained," bourgeois demands of femininity, these demands must be assumed and expected; a woman must be seen as able to enact these demands. If one is always already deemed as lacking or rejecting containment, "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity," she cannot be explode these demands through Karlyn's definition of the unruly woman. Plainly, Black women are always already born into unruliness by virtue of their race. While people of color, and in particular women of color, are deemed unable to enact "ideal" (read: white) femininity, they are simultaneously *expected* to enact this

⁹² Hill Collins, 72.

femininity in order to be deemed a worthy and active participant in the public sphere. These coexisting conditions then create for Black women a double bind, wherein if they *perform* “appropriately” they are nonetheless rendered unruly via their race. However, if they resist this expectation of femininity, they are rendered unruly not only through the act of resistance but also through the application of controlling imaged explained above (Sapphire, SBW, BlackSuperWomen).

Karlyn’s theorization of the unruly woman applies when the woman performing is white. Therefore, I assert that an intersectional marriage between Crunk Feminism/bringing wreck and Karlyn’s “unruly woman” must be understood or enacted. For example, while a Black woman can freely express her unruliness as “speech [which is] is excessive, in quality, content, or tone,” she would not necessarily be enacting unruliness against what is “expected” of her, vis-à-vis controlling imagery like “Sapphire” or the Angry Black Woman. I do not mean to contend that this action is not a form of resistance, or that it is ineffective. I simply note here that it is *not* an unruly act because an unruly act would require satirical subversion. Therefore, it is a form of “bringing wreck.”⁹³

As stated above, the unruly woman is not an entirely appropriate theoretical application to *ABG* due to its lack of intersectional foundation and analysis. The myriad, overlapping, and contrasting controlling imagery affecting Black women’s representation makes identifying “unruly” resistance difficult to establish. Simultaneously, the tactics used in Crunk Feminism are useful for understanding resistance through the “tragic” or earnest frame. However, tactics theorized within Crunk Feminism do not necessarily encompass the nuances of subversion via satire. Nonetheless, the tactic of subverting controlling images through the comic frame, inherent in the unruly woman, is rhetorically compelling. Therefore, I posit here that the unruly woman

⁹³ For reference, see: Crunk Feminist Collective. Pough.

provides us with what I term the rhetoric of unruliness, which is translatable into a Crunk feminist praxis. The rhetoric of unruliness is an act that satirically steps out of the norm both in intent and in articulation. In other words, the intent in the rhetoric of unruliness must be to absurdify oppressive ideology and the articulation must be done so in a satirical manner. In this way, the rhetoric of unruliness shares the same intents and articulations of Crunk Feminism, however it is performed satirically. And while this might sound like it is simply the unruly woman, the rhetoric of unruliness in articulation is not inherently a *subversion* of “that which is expected of a woman.” The articulation of the rhetoric of unruliness is, in essence, an embodied *complication* of the expected and intent to satirically absurdify these expectations.

Theorizing Awkwardness

It is necessary and useful to marry unruliness and Crunk Feminism to sufficiently grasp the cultural and rhetorical critique in context of *ABG*. Here I argue that Issa Rae’s enactment of “awkwardness” is a Crunk feminist enactment of the rhetoric of unruliness. The use of awkwardness is salient when satirically charged because it unveils to the audience a disconnect between what is expected of the protagonist and the protagonist's intentions. Comedians have capitalized on these odd interactions in the comedic genre “cringe comedy.” Jason Middleton notes that rise of “awkward humor” or “cringe comedy” since the rising success “mock-documentary sitcoms like *The Office*, ” (UK, 2001-2003; US, 2005-2013) a television comedy centered on inter-office discourse of white-collar workers.⁹⁴ Cringe comedy produces moments when the audience can *feel* the uncomfortable, on-screen experiences in their tightening shoulders, distortion of their face, and the twisting of their stomach.

⁹⁴ Jason Middleton, *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship*, vol. 61;61.; (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.

Awkward humor or cringe comedy provides viewers pleasure through the experience of moments that feel “too real.” It hinges on humor birthed from awkward situations or social awkwardness. It is an alternative to highly scripted, wholesome sitcoms; it utilizes an aesthetic of flawed “realness” with which audiences could identify. In his work on awkwardness and mock/documentary genres, Middleton argues that awkwardness has become a defining characteristic of contemporary cultural logic.⁹⁵ Middleton notes, “Awkward moments occur when an established mode of representation or reception is unexpectedly challenged, stalled, [or] altered.”⁹⁶

Awkwardness is an important tool for intersectional critique. Where intersectionality is messy and exists with several ambivalences and shades of gray, awkwardness performs this ambivalence. It is a reaction of confusion. It performs carnival though creating a moment of internal chaos and a lack of certainty. In this uncertain state, a light is shone on that which is taken for granted. It is the common sense of the taken for granted that inspired the awkward interaction or experience. Therefore, the audience member can work to establish the ideological factors that went into crafting either the on-screen awkwardness or their own internalized feelings of awkwardness. In this way, Rae’s use of awkwardness engages charged humor, a concept I explore further in Chapter 3.

I examine “awkwardness” as both a tool Rae uses to, in action, disrupt dominant hegemonic imagery, but also to call attention to how these images have been naturalized. In other words, awkwardness in and of itself educates audiences on the *naturalization of* controlling images; it utilizes the rhetoric of unruliness, and satire therein, because in order to get the joke or understand why the moment is awkward, the viewer must understand the nuances of social

⁹⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 4.

expectations and transgressions of these expectations. Awkwardness then runs against the grain of these expectations, thereby denaturalizing them, or at the very least calling attention to the fact that they have been naturalized. Rae specifically enacts awkwardness to break “normative,” stereotypical tropes of Black womanhood.

Additionally, I forward here that important to the study of awkwardness, however, is noting who or what the “cringe trigger” is in a show or scene. In other words, when we examine cringe comedy through the lens of *The Office*, the majority of this awkwardness is centered on Michael Scott. Scott is a white, middle class, middle-aged, middle management, male character who repeatedly makes (ignorantly and “innocuous”) sexist, homophobic, racist, and ableist remarks. The cringe-worthiness of the situation is entirely focused on his character. Pointedly, in *The Office*, Michael is rarely shown as being or feeling awkward, but rather his interactions produce awkwardness. His character’s ignorance is the (“innocuous”) problem and we all have to deal with his ignorance because of his positionality and our relation to him.

In contrast, in *ABG* the audience is asked to relate to J, an awkward, Black woman. Key here is the positionality of the “cringe trigger.” Rae fosters a Crunk feminist praxis by grounding *ABG* in the positionality of J, which thereby makes the cringe-worthy experiences fall on those outside of our personable protagonist. In *ABG*, the cringe trigger is a racist, sexist U.S. imaginary. In this way, Rae enacts rhetoric of unruliness through her use of satirical awkwardness.

To be clear, I posit that awkwardness *is* a satirical enactment of Crunk Feminism, which enacts a meta-rhetoric of unruliness. Rae catalyzes awkwardness as rhetoric of unruliness and an enactment of Crunk Feminism. Awkwardness is a pause. It asks the audience to look at the cringe-worthy moment, the power dynamics, and the application of stereotypes for a moment

longer than expected. The awkwardness of the moment then subtly works against the grain of dominant hegemony. Awkwardness from a marginalized perspective *is* unruly *and* Crunk because it centers the discomfort of the marginalized and shows who is to blame for that discomfort. By centering the marginalized perspective, those ideologies that oppress are exposed as absurd through the rhetoric of unruliness.

In *ABG* the presence of awkwardness is often associated with concealed or “private” displays of bringing wreck – in the form of narrative voice overs and dreamscapes – and a rhetoric of unruliness that does not necessarily ascribe to Karlyn’s unruly woman but rather complicates the controlling images applied to Black womanhood. Therefore there exists an inescapable coexistence of unruliness (subversion through humor) and Crunk Feminism (direct critique) in Issa Rae’s performance of awkwardness. To be clear, I do not claim that each and every performance of awkwardness that one sees in media contains the rhetoric of unruliness and Crunk Feminism. However, I do argue that Rae in particular enacts awkwardness as the rhetoric of unruliness through a Crunk feminist paradigm. In other words, through cutaways, voiceovers, and dreamscapes, Rae uses awkwardness to keep the cipher moving.

Additionally, to clarify, I have not been mis-titling her series this entire chapter. Rae titled her series *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, not “of an Awkward Black Girl,” not “of the Awkward Black Girl.” It is *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*. While it may seem as though Rae inadvertently forgot to add an article in her title, or that she constituted “Awkward Black Girl” as her proper title, I posit she was catalyzing awkward as her initial point of critique in two distinct ways. First, Rae is signifyin’ her knowledge of the stereotypes and controlling imagery applied to Black women in television and mainstream media.⁹⁷ In other

⁹⁷ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

words, mimicking the naming practices of the existing tropes (e.g. StrongBlackWoman, BlackSuperWoman, Angry Black Woman, Sassy Black Woman), Rae stands up to a white, heteropatriarchal, U.S. imaginary. Even in her title, Rae demonstrates her *knowledge of her history* signifyin' that she sees how media industries have constructed the image of Black women, she understands the influence media has on the imaginary, and she understands the strategy and what tools she need to use to do the same. And with that, Rae enacted a type of unruliness and Crunk Feminism by subverting the current power structure; she created her own mediated "trope." She "actively redefined [herself]," in a way "invading the space of the courtroom [the dominant ideology] and overturning its decorum."⁹⁸ Rae performs carnival by destabilizing the power differentiation between those who define and those who are defined.

Second, I posit that in taking on the persona of Awkward Black Girl, Rae is playing with the well-known Television series "Adventures of Superman" (1952-1958). However, rather than Adventures and Superman, Rae centralizes *Mis*-Adventures. This slant to the original meaning implies an embrace of those moments that might not be so positive. It is an embrace of the ambivalent and awkward. Additionally, rather than "super" being her "super power," Rae positions awkwardness as a power. In other words, Rae makes awkwardness J's world-making, agentive characteristic. Rather than an other-worldly capacity, J's awkwardness enacts political resistance providing additional representation of Black womanhood *and*, as described above, creating that pause for viewers to address their prejudices and any stereotypes they hold about Black women and the signification of Blackness.

⁹⁸ Karlyn, 17.

Issa Rae: Awkward and Black

Issa Rae created a space for herself online through the two-season run of *ABG*, wherein she could play and project her own images and stories of awkward unruliness. In her memoir, she notes the exigence for her web series:

I felt surrounded by mainstream media's negative images of black women. ... I grew angry, resentful, and impatient. How hard is it to portray the three-dimensional woman of color on television or in film? I am surrounded by them. They're my friends. I talk them every day. How come Hollywood won't acknowledge us? Are we a joke to them?⁹⁹

In response, Rae created her own quasi-autobiographical series iterating her experience of being awkward and Black to add to the already existing images of Black womanhood on big and small screens.

ABG is a web series following the single-protagonist J in her love, work, and social life. The series ran from 2011-2013 and, in that time, garnered a loyal and supportive fan base. In fact, Rae explains that after the sixth episode, she and co-producer Tracy Oliver were flat broke and brainstorming how they could keep the show funded. As a result, Rae started a "Kickstarter" campaign, asking for \$33,000.¹⁰⁰ Rae explains that within twenty-four hours of posting the campaign on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, they had received \$4,000. Today, the amount closed at \$56,259 with 1,960 funding backers.¹⁰¹ Rae notes that at the time of the Kickstarter, they were averaging about 60,000 viewers per each of their six episodes. Therefore, with only 3.2 percent of their typical viewership donating an average of \$28.70, *ABG* was able to stay fully funded for the rest of its term.

⁹⁹ Issa Rae, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (Atria / 37 INK, 2016), 45.

¹⁰⁰ Issa Rae interview posted to The Blog, 2011, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/issa-rae/kickstarter-awkward-black-girl_b_922966.html.

¹⁰¹ Awkward Black Girl, "The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl," Kickstarter, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1996857943/the-misadventures-of-awkward-black-girl>.

Digital and D.I.Y. platforms offer a space for marginalized and unruly women's voices to create content and garner support. These spaces allow for marginalized voices to craft and deploy their own counter-hegemony, differing from predominantly top-down communication platforms like television, film, and radio that preceded the Internet era. Rae contributes her success to the accessibility and versatility of online space:

If it weren't for YouTube, I would be extremely pessimistic, but I'm not anymore.

YouTube has revolutionized content creation. If it weren't for YouTube, I would still be at studios trying to convince executives that Awkward Black Girls really do exist... If it weren't for social media, I don't know that black women would even be a fully formed blip on the radar. If it weren't for internet forums and fan pages, communities of dark women wouldn't be empowered by their natural hair in a media society that tells them their hair should be straightened and their skin should be lighter.¹⁰²

Here Rae hints at the incredible impact online spaces have made for marginalized communities in terms of diversifying representation in digitized, small, and big screens.

The Internet, as noted above, has played a paramount role in the creation and circulation of material from marginalized voices. Moreover, social media and self-broadcasting sites host a convergence of popular culture and community-building affordances in the same (digital) space. Pointedly, these spaces are necessarily detached from the same physical space, allowing for ease of access. Rae explains the importance of online spaces for people of color communities:

Online content and new media are changing our communities and changing the demand for and accessibility of that content. The discussion of representation is one that has been repeated over and over again, and the solution has always been that it's up to us to support, promote, and create the images that we want to see. Ten years ago, making that

¹⁰² Rae, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, 46.

suggestion would have required way more work than it does now, and my love of taking shortcuts probably wouldn't allow me to make any dents on that front. But with ever-evolving, new accessible technologies, there are so many opportunities to reclaim our images. There's no excuse not to, and I've never felt more purposeful in my quest to change the landscape of television.¹⁰³

Rae indicates here her clear understanding that she was not simply diversifying the televisual landscape, but that she was inserting her voice into the struggle of the signification of Blackness. Rae intended *ABG* to be, in essence, a convergence of politics, popular culture, and new media capabilities.

Chapters and Methods

In what follows, I perform a quantitative content analysis and rhetorical analysis of *ABG*. In Chapter Two, I deploy a quantitative content analysis of YouTube users' comments on episodes of *ABG*. I retrieve discourse content from YouTube. In this analysis, I examine moments of identification and perform an analysis fans' reiteration of the awkwardness appearing in *ABG* (e.g. where fan's comment on lines from the episode). I examine trends from the perspectives of audience members' impression of the text, their identification of the text, and how their view of awkwardness intersects with these components of audience interaction listed above. I argue that audiences form interpretive communities around *ABG*, which is salient due to the text's ability to resignify Blackness and awkwardness, thereby purging the producers and viewers of guilt associated with the intersections of their positionalities. In this chapter, I argue that awkwardness and the rhetoric of unruliness performed in the content of the show foster the cultural citizenship and enact a catharsis.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 46-47.

In Chapter Three, I perform a rhetorical analysis of episodes from *ABG* and hone in on “awkward” moments to determine their rhetorical purpose at the syntactic and paradigmatic levels of Black women’s representation. I specifically focus my attention on “awkward” moments within the scenes and moments of unruliness without awkwardness present. In other words, I examine moments where Rae’s J, from the audience’s perspective, directly confronts her antagonists or stereotypes being pushed upon her. However, I say this happens from the perspective of an audience, because it happens in cutaway moments, dreamscapes, and flashbacks, symbolizing dominant hegemony’s demand on Black women to tighten their jaw. These moments are, nonetheless, enactments of unruliness because they are intended to be seen and shared with a wider audience. I posit this both awkwardness and the rhetoric of unruliness as politically galvanizing and cathartic for those viewers who, as I will explain in Chapter Two, create cultural citizenship around *ABG*.

Following the work of André Brock, Lynette Kvasny, and Kayla Hales, I analyze the collected data in Chapter Two using critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA), a framework composed of research on capital, technocultural theory, and Black feminist.¹⁰⁴ CTDA works to subvert instrumental or deterministic accounts of interactions between people and technology by looking at the artifact’s interpellation by its users.¹⁰⁵ In other words, it examines Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) through a user-centric lens, rather than applying a dominant gaze, in order to better understand how users shape media platforms to suit their needs. CTDA looks at form, the user, and the interface in tandem with an attention to the ideologies that underlie them. As an enactment of my CTDA, I used the findings of my second chapter (quantitative content analysis of comments) to inform the themes I examine and selection

¹⁰⁴ Brock, Kvasny, and Hales.

¹⁰⁵ Brock, "Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis."

of episodes in my third chapter (rhetorical content analysis of *ABG*). Broadly, this process began with the creation of in vivo codes, meaning codes taken from the YouTube comments themselves to create a theme, and utilized generic codes in order to more fully understand how users utilize YouTube and understand *ABG*. Next, I created categories from these codes in order to analyze the trends. Additionally, this coding process informed the selection of episodes I analyzed in Chapter 3. Categorized into “Work,” “Dating,” and “Social Life” based on the themes of each episode. I analyze the most commented on episodes in the categories work and dating, as they were the themes that garnered the most comments and liked comments. I then observe the trends from this analysis through the lens of a Crunk feminist framework to see how and where users engage with awkwardness and the rhetoric of unruliness.

My decision to deploy mixed methods are threefold. First, as a white woman performing a critical analysis of Rae’s rhetorical tactics, it is imperative that I ground my research in the voices of women who see themselves directly represented in a way they have not previously on mediated screens. More explicitly, I actively aim to avoid inscribing white notions on to Black representations without the presence of African American voices. Second, because satire and comedy are inherently polysemic, qualitatively grounding rhetorical criticism in prevailing interpretations of the satirical critique aids in establishing satire’s interaction with multiple hegemonies. And finally, I deploy mixed methods as my own form of academic unruliness. Borrowing from the fields of rhetoric, women and gender studies, cultural studies, media studies, new media studies, and comedy studies, it is my hope that this thesis serves as evidence for the strength and promise scholarship can contain when researchers extend their extend into knowledges outside of their “home” discipline.

This thesis interrogates the shades of gray, the moments of subversion, and the audience reaction to awkwardness and ambivalence. I examine how YouTube works as a galvanizing tool for cultural citizenship. I also interrogate how charged humor can also be ambivalent in its content, but nonetheless considered charge through the introduction of awkwardness. This thesis weaves together many fields of literature but is nonetheless grounded on the experience and influence has provided for young, marginalized voices to be heard and archived. This thesis is about teaching and learning of each other's lived experiences and how the ever-changing technological landscape has fostered the struggle over significance of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability. This thesis is about silliness. It is about awkwardness. And it is about the seriousness with which we should understand that which is silly, awkward, ambivalent, and commonplace.

(Don't) Read the Comments

YouTube as a platform has diversified and made available myriad representations. It has become an archive in the struggle over signification. In the next chapter, I analyze how Issa Rae's voice enters in the struggle over signification. However, Rae's voice is not the only one that surfaces on YouTube in this struggle. In this chapter, I perform a quantitative content analysis of audience interaction on *ABG*'s YouTube videos. I begin with an overview of YouTube and its relation to digital reception studies. I then move to an overview of methods I deployed, paying mind to the trends I found. I conclude with a discussion of these trends and how they relate to Burke's understanding of guilt in relation to the resignification.

Central to this chapter is Crunk Feminism and awkwardness. Crunk Feminism plays two key roles in this chapter. The first is more meta-level in my process of writing: I began my thesis research with the examination of these YouTube comments. I selected the themes and points of critique, which later built my thesis arguments, from the examination and analysis of these YouTube comments. Rather than looking at *ABG* from my perspective in academia, I sought out and centered the voices and perspectives of those avid audience members who attached their (online) identity to *ABG* through commenting. Therefore, it was my aim to enact a Crunk feminist analysis by complicating the division of (academic) Theory and theory (based on lived experience). My purpose is to expose how this fusion of T/theory enriches an analysis. I aim to perform how theory can inform Theory and vice versa. My thesis flows inductively, first examining the comments, then the content of the videos (Chapter 2), and finally examining how this fits into broader cultural discourses (Conclusion). Therefore, this chapter operates as the foundation of my study. Second, by centering the commenters in my writing process, I rely their Crunk Feminist praxis. By centering the voices of the viewers, thereby naturalizing their

perspectives, it naturally follows that a de-naturalization of dominant perspective would occur. When examining comments through a CTDA and Crunk feminist lens, I could evaluate and analyze which (normative) perspectives are being absurdified and how this absurdification disrupts the status quo. Therefore, as the previous chapter notes, politicized awkwardness yields a crunk feminist destabilization of the status quo.

Awkwardness plays a useful, crunk feminist role in my analysis in this chapter. Namely, in this chapter, I sought to understand the responses to awkwardness from the YouTube commenters. Below I argue that in their expressions of their own awkwardness, users politicize awkwardness as a galvanizing tool. Moreover, I argue that through the re-articulations of Rae's "unruly" moments users cathartically express their own sort of unruliness. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates how awkwardness can foster a politics of community and how this community can find a catharsis through re-articulations of unruliness.

YouTube Communities

Reception studies examine how audiences shape and construct the text both at an individual and community level. Jonathan Gray, in his work on *The Simpsons*, forwards intertextuality, or the "transportation of one signed system into another" which may produce an entirely new meaning with the combined material,¹⁰⁶ as an important concept for understanding media and reception studies. Gray notes that examining intertextuality asks the interpreter to understand it as simultaneously the sum and the individual parts.¹⁰⁷

In reference to YouTube, a clip is never simply that which appears in the viewing pane. A clip is composed of the external references made within the episode, the script, the audio, the

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Gray, *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 27.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 26.

cultural references, the similar videos that appear beside it, the uploader's name, the number of views and likes it has received, the comments that appear below, etc. What makes YouTube an interesting site for intertextual discovery is the display and archive of interpretive communities that congregate around each text. An interpretive community is one that is drawn to a text because of their orientation and disposition to the discourses that surround them.¹⁰⁸ In other words, the way of observing and studying interpretive communities centers on the viewers enacting agency and understanding on the text, rather than the text's agency in the world. Gray explains the importance of understanding

interpretive communities as always preceding and circumventing the text ... when interpretive communities and parodic texts work together, the parody's interpretive work and claims can continue after (and before) direct textual experiences. In doing so, the interpretive community can bring together interpreting individuals to propose general, shared and socially activated meanings.¹⁰⁹

The act of understanding a text does not happen independent of the text but rather it is intertextually linked to its interpretive community.¹¹⁰

I suggest here that because of interpretive communities' pre-textual orientation, there is a strong correlation between interpretive communities and cultural citizenship, which Gray hints at in his work.¹¹¹ As mentioned in the introductory chapter, cultural citizenship centers on an identity-based sense of belonging and community. It naturally follows, albeit simplistically, that those with a specific cultural citizenry could form interpretive communities around texts that affirm and promote their identity. Therefore, charged humor, which hinges on cultural

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 127.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 125.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 127.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 96.

citizenship, would likely also attract interpretive communities with similar or shared cultural traits and practices.

Burgess and Green suggest that YouTube is a place that fosters cultural citizenship.¹¹² They state that YouTube, as a site of diverse representations, draws people to it as a place that they can go to find a representation of their identity, which might not otherwise have been accessed. Moreover, Burgess and Green forward YouTube as “a potential site of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship – a space in which individuals can represent their identities and perspectives, engage with self representations of others, and encounter cultural difference.”¹¹³ However, they continue on to explore the idea that, although YouTube is location of converging identities and cultures, there is still a paradoxical participation gap; certain individuals have more privilege to participate in the spaces than others.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, YouTube *must* be seen as a participatory platform. Therefore, YouTube, as a platform, has the ability to foster a powerful collective able to enact Crunk feminist practice through their chorus of voices.

YouTube is not a one-way street for passive consumption. On the contrary, YouTube upsets and destabilizes the respective roles of “producer” and “consumer.”¹¹⁵ Bruns’ concepts of “produser” and “produsage” intentionally queers the relationship between consumer and producer/active and passive participant in order to mark a divergence from traditional roles of audience and actor.¹¹⁶ This is not to say that *all* consumers on YouTube are naturally also producers. Ridell notes that there exists a large majority of Internet users who “participate” via

¹¹² Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *Youtube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge;Malden, MA;: Polity, 2009), 78-79.

¹¹³ Ibid., 81.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 81.

¹¹⁵ Anandam Kavoori, "Making Sense of Youtube," *Global Media Journal* 13, no. 24 (2015)., 2

¹¹⁶ Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*, vol. 45;45.; (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

lurking, or by acting as an “invisible audience.”¹¹⁷ In fact, a rule of thumb for any participatory website, like YouTube, is the 90-9-1 rule, wherein it can generally be believed that 90 percent of the community are lurkers, nine percent of the community engage with or edit content, and only one percent are actively producing new content.¹¹⁸ Therefore, it potentially goes without saying, there is a large community of consumers whose data is unreachable, and therefore there is a limitation on any research regarding participatory action online.

Ridell suggests an alternative the produser construction of YouTube traffickers: audiencing. She notes that the collapse of consumers and producers “conflates the differences between these two as distinct modes of action and renders it difficult to examine their specificities and the specific ways they interrelate in online environments.”¹¹⁹ Instead, then, Ridell finds observing interactions as distinct, yet related, “articulations” of audiencing or producing more productive in understanding how people relate to media texts. Ridell notes, the activity of audiencing ... differs fundamentally from performing or presenting and, in the (mass) mediated context, from the production of media content as a mode of action. Characteristic of media audiencing is the engagement with produced materials, not their creation. When people, who at a certain moment act as an audience, begin to generate content, they move from the mode of action characteristic of audiencing to the mode characteristic of producing.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Seija Ridell, "Mode of Action Perspective to Engagements with Social Media: Articulating Activities on the Public Platforms of Wikipedia and Youtube," in *The Social Use of Media: Cultural and Social Scientific Perspectives on Audience Research*, ed. Helena Bilandzic, et al. (Chicago: Intellect, 2012)., danah m. boyd, and Nicole B. Ellison. "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, no. 1 (2007): 210-30.

¹¹⁸ Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, *The Youtube Reader*, vol. 12.;12; (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 12.

¹¹⁹ Ridell, 18-19.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 18.

In other words, an audience member does not enact agency on the text through discussing their interpretation or relation to the text, they remain firmly in the role of audience (the 90 percent). Whereas those producers are actively creating content, in video or comment form, are the role of producer. Ridell continues to express that fans are constantly flipping back and forth between the role of audience and producer; “they act as audiences not only for their idol’s work but also for comments on it, and they produce not only their own comments on it but comment also on comments by others.”¹²¹ These fans witness their favorite shows and other peoples’ articulations on it, and they will also flip into roles of producers by commenting on the videos and engaging in conversation with those other audience members with whom they agree or disagree.

While I agree with this construction of articulations, I feel the need to complicate it slightly when examining YouTube. Namely, there are different forms of “producing” and “audiencing” that exist in liminal states, which Ridell’s construction does not encompass. For example, there are some comments that consist specifically of, what I would consider, a performance of audience (e.g. “lol,” “i love this,” “so good”). However, as described previously, YouTube consumption is not strictly the consumption of the video. The consumption of a YouTube clip is inherently shaped by the texts that surround it. The surrounding texts inherently includes these quick articulations. Therefore, even though the intention may have simply been to perform audience, the viewer has entered a liminal space where they are not quite producing, but rather they are part of the 9 percent of editors. I see this interaction with the text more as an articulation of “testifying.” Their comment *is* in one way or another shaping the text, and they *are* still intending to remain in the place role of audience. However, they are not a passive, lurking audience. Rather, they are an active, visible *testifying* audience.

¹²¹ Ibid., 24.

The distinction here is important as it relates back to cultural citizenship. Cultural citizenship is closely tied to having a sense of belonging or feeling noticed and seen in a representation one otherwise would not. To rearticulate Krefting from my introduction, cultural citizenship is all about:

empowering otherwise marginalized social identities, a means of locating and asserting oneself within a specific social, cultural, and political matrix in order to counteract inequitable treatment, develop community, acquire rights, build identity, and experience a sense of shared cultural belonging.¹²²

I view testifying as a way of “locating and asserting oneself.” Testifying is not only a way to make oneself seen but also to affirm to the existence and experiences of those representations present in the YouTube video.

Testifying is a way to create visibility, thereby creating a powerful mass of people who share similar ideas. In this way, testifying in YouTube comments engages two Crunk feminist commandments: *wield technology* and *recognize the power of the collective*. By wielding technology, in alignment with CTDA, commenters on YouTube use the comment section to create a space of community. They converse with one another, or they leave comments for Rae. The users engage the platform’s affordances to testify to their experiences through the work of Rae. They shape the platform to work for them as much as the platform shapes their discourses. Second, users also recognize the power of the collective. As will become clear in my discussion of impressions, testifying creates a sort of cultural citizenship that empowers its citizens. Their commentary solidifies their position as part of the collective supporting Rae.

¹²² Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 18.

The act of articulating oneself as a “producer” in a comment on YouTube videos can and does take place. These comments are generally more robust and consist of an interpretation not necessarily obvious in the video’s content. Michael Strangelove demonstrates that “women of YouTube are teaching themselves to speak out against sexism”¹²³ while building networks of support and friendship.¹²⁴ This sentiment is echoed in LaToya Sawyer’s work. Sawyer examines online spaces wherein Black women acquire social capital by signifying,¹²⁵ performing knowledge within their online communities,¹²⁶ and craft a space of knowledge-making and identity-affirming discourse.¹²⁷

Sawyer refers to these spaces as crafting “Black girl literacies,” which, like texts from interpretive communities, are not simply understood through traditional notions of being able to read the words, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the ability to “read and make meaning of social contexts.”¹²⁸ In other words, the crafting of cultural citizenship and interpretive communities takes place in the textual space below YouTube videos. There Black women express how they feel seen, represented, and connected to others like them. Moreover, these spaces are those in which their voices are centered and gain technical capital *and* cultural capital, which they have long been denied in the wider public sphere.¹²⁹

¹²³ Michael Strangelove, *Watching Youtube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People* (Buffalo [N.Y.]; Toronto;: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 98.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 99.

¹²⁵ LaToya Lydia Sawyer, ""Don't Try and Play Me Out!": The Performances and Possibilities of Digital Black Womanhood" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017), 16.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 104.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 90.

¹²⁹ Andre Brock, Lynette Kvasny, and Kayla Hales, "Cultural Appropriations of Technical Capital," *Information, Communication & Society* 13, no. 7 (2010).

“I feel *seen*:” Analyzing YouTube Comments

In this chapter, I perform a content analysis of 1,150 comments on the YouTube’s *ABG* episodes from season one and two. I limited my sample size to only the comments that happened within the year of the season’s posting (e.g. season one, I pulled comments from 2011-2012, season two, I pulled comments from 2012-2013). I chose to limit my sample in this way because I wanted the comments I examine to be grounded within the context of their publishing. Because YouTube acts as an archive and keeps videos available to view into the future, a viewer commenting in 2018 may have a very different understanding of the video’s content than a viewer experiencing the content within the year it was created. Therefore, I wanted to search for the thematic trends that surfaced from one specific period of time.

In addition to limiting my sample, I also narrowed in on the number of comments I coded. In total, I coded fifty comments from each of the twenty-three episodes. The fifty I chose were made up of a combination of all “liked” comments from each video and then a randomized assortment of comments until I reached fifty per video. I narrowed the amount of comments per video in order to create a project that would fit within the time constraints for producing a thesis. In addition, I chose to comment a combination of liked and random comments for a few reasons. I specifically chose to examine the “liked” comments because they demonstrate a type of intercommunity discourse, or testifying. These comments also seemed most interesting to me because the implication a “like” demonstrates. Though I cannot say for sure the motivation each viewer has for “liking” something, I hypothesize that it is because viewers see an importance in the comment and feel the need to demonstrate this show of appreciation. Their action then “promotes” the liked comment in a sense, as each liked comment appears closer to the video and is therefore more likely to be seen by *ABG*’s audience.

I chose to also examine randomized comments because I wanted to see what discourses were taking place that were not being “promoted.” As Burgess and Green note, YouTube is a site of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship. Disagreements, misunderstandings, and “trolling” are bound to emerge when a site is composed of producers from myriad cultures. The moments of productive dissention would have been missed should I only have examined the comments that were promoted by those who are part of a shared interpretive community. I also chose to code a randomized assortment of comments up to fifty on each video so that I had an equal number of comments to code on each video, because some episodes had twenty-three liked comments whereas other episodes had zero liked comments. I attribute this disparity partially to the fact that YouTube is an ever-evolving social media website. I also attribute this disparity partially to the *themes* addressed in each episode, with the themes of dating and work garnering more social interest. More details on this process can be found in my methods section.

Sonia Livingstone notes that there are several limitations a YouTube researcher runs into in their study. One of which being that “subtle rearrangement of people and media, adjusting the possibilities for identity, relationships, commonality and resistance.”¹³⁰ Some structural changes that may alter the data and representation of my data are the changes in “rating features” on YouTube. For example, it seems that in the transition from “thumbs up/thumbs down” to up and downvotes in 2011, many users lost the ability to use this feature and, therefore their “liking” interactions with other comments may not have been recorded.¹³¹

In addition to small feature changes and bugs that affect the data, there have also been more structural changes that alter the ways users interact and build community. Central here is

¹³⁰ Sonia Livingstone, "Exciting Moments in Audience Research: Past, Present and Future," in *The Social Use of Media: Cultural and Social Scientific Perspectives on Audience Research*, ed. Helena Bilandzic, et al. (Chicago: Intellect, 2012), 177.

¹³¹ Monti, "Why Can't I Vote up or Down on a Video Comment? - Google Product Forums," <https://productforums.google.com/forum/#!topic/youtube/F7vCXBxv3bY>.

the change YouTube made in late 2011 to jettison the “friends” feature, which allowed users to build a community of online friends as part of their YouTube persona and profile. Instead, YouTube opted for “Channels” and “Address Book,” where instead users can subscribe to their favorite channels and users and add a limited number of users to their contacts.¹³² I want to take a moment to pause on the change in connotations from “friend” to “subscriber” and “contact.” As I noted in my previous chapter, the structure in which discourse occurs pointedly shapes the discourse therein. Margaret Stewart, former director of User Experience at YouTube headquarters, reported that the 2011 change was based on the site’s shift toward channels and containers for video content.¹³³ Implied here is the change away from social media aspects. Therefore, in this shift, YouTube’s language shifted from one of friendship and personability to more businesslike “contact” and “subscriber” relationship.

A full exploration of the user reactions to this shift is not central to this project, however the forum posts show quite a bit of displeasure with YouTube’s decision to make this shift. One user expresses their concerns as follows:

There is no way to see all of my friends – whether I’m subscribed to them or not – at once. So tell me, how is this easier or an improvement? ... Where did c. 19,000 of my friends go? How am I supposed to be able to view or contact those 19,000 or so users if the Address Book has a 3,000 user limit?

I don't get how deleting around 19,000 of my 22,000+ of my friends makes YouTube more “streamlined” and “efficient.” Changing friends to “contacts” also removes the

¹³² Ibid., Yt, 2011 #326, Taylor, 2011 #327

¹³³ Chris Taylor, "Youtube Gets Its Biggest Makeover Ever," CNN.

social aspect of YouTube. Please change it back. I worked very hard for all those friendships, as did many others who used and liked the friend feature.¹³⁴

As this user expresses, the shift YouTube made away from the more “social” aspect of the site also engendered broader changes on user’s profiles. Furthermore, with this change also came a depersonalization of user profiles, which marks another limitation on my data collection. While I attempted to collect information about the YouTube commenters, including demographic information such as gender identity, friends, subscriptions, content shared, etc. In the current version of YouTube, these identifiers have been removed and now all that remains is a list of subscribers and occasionally a profile picture. Therefore, there was not enough public information provided about users to draw demographic conclusions about them.

Coding

As mentioned in my introductory chapter, I placed each of *ABG*’s episodes into one or two categories based on the predominant themes of the episode. These categories were work, social life, and dating. I then sought to determine how many comments and how many liked comments existed within each category. A chart with the full breakdown of comments and likes can be found in the appendix. However, for the purposes here, it is salient to know that of the 54,614 comments collected 25 percent of the comments were on videos about dating, 24 percent of the comments were on videos about the office, 15 percent of the comments were on videos about social life, 22 percent of the comments were on videos that were about a combination of dating and the office, 16 percent of the comments were on videos that were about a combination of dating and social life, and 0 percent of the comments were on videos that were about a combination of social life and work. This categorization points to an interest viewers’ interest in

¹³⁴ Monti.

the topic of dating and happenings of the workplace. For that reason, my analysis below and in the next chapter highlight comments dealing with interracial dating and workplace power dynamics. In my conversation below, I argue that conversation takes place more on the themes of the office and dating because these are moments power dynamics are most explicit. In other words, I argue that Rae's J uses awkwardness to point out the potential power dynamics and her discomfort with them in reference to working for both a white woman and a light skinned woman of color, and dating a white man. In this way, awkwardness is important for commenters to observe and work through in the comments below. It is a galvanizing tool for the audience to relate to and express their mutual discomfort with the power dynamics.

As mentioned above, I used the qualitative analysis application Nvivo to code and analyze 1,150 comments from *ABG*. Using Amy Madden, Ian Ruthven, and David McMenemy's work, in which they performed content analysis on 66,637 YouTube comments and constructed a categorization system for YouTube comment content analysis,¹³⁵ as a framework for my study, I crafted a codebook. In their study, they discovered ten broad categories under which comments generally fell and further honed in on the nuances of the comments by creating 58 subcategories, or codes, of content. In my own analysis, I also utilized ten categories, nine of which I based on Madden et. al's previous work and one that I crafted specifically for this project. To begin my examination, I created ten categories, nine of which I based on the categories of interest from Madden et. al's research, as will be noted below, and one that was of specific interest to this study. I altered, collapsed, deleted, and added my own codes to those Madden et al. had already created. Ultimately, created 51 codes. For my purposes here I will define prevalent categories

¹³⁵ Amy Madden, Ian Ruthven, and David McMenemy, "A Classification Scheme for Content Analyses of Youtube Video Comments," *Journal of Documentation* 69, no. 5 (2013).

and codes below. A complete list, with description and examples of categories and codes can be found in the appendix.

Categories and codes

- *ABG* Project specific: This category is made up of codes that surfaced through observed trends in comments or themes of interest I created. I created this category to hone in on discourses of interest taking place within *ABG*. In particular, I added to this category the codes of liked, identification, and awkwardness.
 - Liked: This code is used to distinguish when comments have been “liked” or “upvoted” by other users. It is not determined by the content of the comment. I used this code to mark moments of interaction between users and give salience show which sentiments carried more weight within the *ABG* online community.
 - Awkwardness: This code is present whenever a user makes any reference the word awkward. It may appear when: the user is describing something as awkward within the clip, the user is relating to something as awkward, or the user expresses any sentiment involving “awkwardness.”
 - e.g. “This was the most painfully awkward episode yet! Love it!” / “That awkward moment when you don't know whether to close the video or keep watching.”
 - Identification: This is a parent code that is further broken down into “positive identification,” “negative identification,” and “Neutral identification.” It is present whenever a user makes reference to identifying with experiences of the characters. Important to this expression is the crafting of cultural citizenship, and

how that cultural citizenship further relates to the Crunk feminist commandment of knowing the power of the collective.

- Positive Identification: This code is present whenever a user expresses positive sentiment in reference to their identification as/with something in the video. Notable here is that while the comment might have a positive impression or opinion, if the positive inclination did not explicitly link to the identification, it was not counted as “Positive Identification.”
 - e.g. “Issa you are an inspiration to many awkward woman of color.
... FINALLY A CHARACTER I CAN RELATE TO ON SO
MANY DIFFERENT LEVELS #dope”
- Negative Identification: This code is present whenever a user expresses negative sentiment in reference to their identification as/with something in the video.
 - This code never occurred and thus I do not have an exemplar comment to supply.
- Neutral Identification: This code is present whenever users express identification but either make no inclination as to whether the user observes their identification as a positive or negative attribute OR when the comment is ambivalent and therefore I am unable to determine the user’s inclination.
 - e.g. “i am so awkward i felt awkward watching this” / “OMG!!
Looove this show. I AM awkward black girl, hahahahahahaha.”

- Advice: This category consists of codes in which users request or give advice to other YouTubers. It was developed from the work of Madden et. al.
 - This code is present whenever a user comments a recommendation for another video that viewers would enjoy.
 - e.g. “If u like this try the ‘Psycho Girlfriend’ series its hilarious”
- Expression of Personal Feelings: This category consists of codes wherein users note how the episode made them react emotionally.
 - Positive: This code is present whenever a user expresses positive feelings (or that the episode has affected them positively) about the episode of the content therein.
 - E.g. “I love how this episode is a sort of montage to the neighborhood I grew up in. I grew up off manchester right there by the great western forum...Awesome!”
 - Negative: This code is present whenever a user expresses negative feelings (or that the episode has affected them negatively) about the episode of the content therein.
 - E.g. “so depressing!”
 - General: This code is present whenever a user expresses ambivalent feelings (or that the episode has affected them both/neither positively or negatively) about the episode of the content therein.
 - E.g. “No lie this awkward date makes me feel 13 again”
- General Conversation: This category consists of utterances that work to create or maintain common aspects of conversation between users. These comments might relate to the content of the video, but they do not have to necessarily. The codes within this

category are not central to this project, statistically or in regard to their substance.

Therefore, I will eschew their definitions for the moment, but they can be found in the appendix.

- **Impression:** This category is complete with codes that indicate viewers' reactions to videos or comments. They are generally short and immediate without much substance. This category differs from that of "Opinion" because opinion codes tend to reflect longer comments with more substance and thought. They give more detail and evidence of the user's reaction. These codes are further break down into Positive Impression, Negative Impression, and Neutral Impression. Expressions of impressions are closely related to the act of testifying.
 - **Positive Impression:** This code is present when a user comments a short reaction with positive sentiments.
 - E.g. "lol"/":D"/"so good!!!"
 - **Negative Impression:** This code is present when a user comments a short reaction with negative sentiments.
 - E.g. "Ewww!"/ ":("/"boring"
 - **Neutral Impression:** This code is present when a user comments a short reaction with ambivalent sentiments, or I am unable to determine whether the sentiment is positive or negative.
 - E.g. "wow!"/ "OMG" / "wtf!"
- **Information:** This category is made of codes that request or provide factual information about something in the video content, video context, or a tangentially unrelated topic.

- Give: This is a parent subcategory of three of the following codes. These codes are present when the user makes a direct statement that provides factual information to other users. This code grouping is salient because of its relation to cultural capital. Namely, I forward that by providing information, users' voices take on a sort of validity and value that they might otherwise not have.
 - Content: This code is present when a user makes explicit reference to something in the video and further provides information about that which they reference.
 - E.g. "LMAO that reference to LOVE & Basketball ... IDIED!"
 - Context: This code is present when a user makes reference to something related to the video and further provides information about that which they reference.
 - E.g. "Yall know Amir is like a prince right! Like a legit prince!"
- Opinion: This category encompasses codes wherein users request or give their perspectives on the video or on other comments. These comments are generally more robust than an impression comment in that they will give evidence for their claims. This category differs from the advice category in that it opinions do not have an explicit aim of persuasion. They also differ from information in that the opinions expressed are by definition subjective information.
 - Give: This is a parent subcategory of three of the following codes. These codes are present when the user states an opinion on the content of or relating to the clip.

- Positive: This code is present when a user states a subjective claim with a positive spin on their expressed point-of-view.
 - E.g. “It sucks that the internet cesspit has been shitting on this series. Don't let it get you down because ABG is great- relatable, funny and well-written!”
- Negative: This code is present when a user states a subjective claim with a negative spin on their expressed point-of-view.
 - E.g. “never make a nother video ever again this isnt even funny. this is what happens when women try comedy”
- General: This code is present when a user states a subjective claim, which I was unable to determine.
 - E.g. “how she says \'harassment\' is making me uncomfortable”
- Site Processes: This category is made of codes in which users make reference to or give opinion on site design, features, and interface that affect their experience of *ABG*.
 - Rating features: This code is present when a user mentions the “like” or “upvote” features of the video or other comments.
 - E.g. “2 dislikes...must have hit the wrong button!”
 - Profiles and Subscriptions: This code is present when users make reference to their profile, the clip’s host profile, or the act of “following” (subscribing to) the series.
 - E.g. “Definitely a new subscriber!”

Site Features

third least common	Least Common	Most Common	Most Liked
code to appear was	Negative Identification (0%)	Positive Impression (61%)	Positive Impression (237 Liked/34%)
in reference to	Expression of Negative Feelings (0.009%)	Video Content/Direct Quote (36%)	Video Content/Direct Quote (192 Liked/47%)
comments wherein	Recommend Another Video (0.009%)	Video Content/ Paraphrasing (27%)	Video Content/ Paraphrasing (106 Liked/34%)
users recommend	Rating Features (0.02%)	Information/Give/Content (8.3%)	Give Neutral Opinion (25 Liked/32%)
another clip or	Profiles and Subscriptions (0.02%)	Neutral Impression (7.3%)	Information/Give/Content (22 Liked/23%)
video (0.009			

percent). Next most common was making reference to the rating features (0.02 percent). And the fifth least common code to surface occurred when users referenced profiles and subscriptions (0.2 percent). Overall, the site processes category was less densely coded in relation to the other categories.

Expressing Relation to Content

One of the main trends I noted were users relating to the material within the clip. Within this trend, I include reactions, opinions, or expressions of identifying with the content of the clip. The code that surfaced the most was Positive Impression (61 percent). In addition to being the most common code, Positive Impression also was the most liked code (34 percent of all Positive Impression codes were “liked” by other users). Within the top five most common codes also is a Neutral impression (7.3 percent). Furthermore, negative identification (0 percent) was only code that did not surface at all. Expression of negative feelings only surfaced once (0.009 percent). In addition to the most common and least common codes, another trend that surfaced was the

amount of expressions of neutral opinions of the video content were among the most liked comments (23 percent of the total 76 comments were liked).

Presentation of Information

In addition to users expressing their relation to the content, another trend I noted was an expression of information or content in the clip. One of the codes that surfaced most often was the reference to the video's content in the form of a direct quote (36 percent), which was also one of the most liked comments (47 percent of these comments were "liked"). The next most common code was a reference to video content in the form of paraphrasing (27 percent), which was liked at a rate of 34 percent. Finally, the fourth most common code was user's presentation of information in reference to the contents of the clip (8.3 percent), 23 percent of which were liked by other users.

*Codes with Common Overlap*¹³⁶

Many of the codes that commonly occur together are made up of those codes that are most common. For example, the most common overlap was that of direct quote with a positive impression of this quote (overlap occurred in 67 percent of possible comments, 24 percent of the total comments). The next most common overlap was a paraphrasing of the scene with a positive impression of the description (overlap occurred in 58 percent of possible comments, 15 percent of the total comments). The third most common overlap of codes occurred when both a paraphrased scene and a neutral opinion of that scene were present (overlap occurred in 53 percent of possible comments, 3.4 percent of the total comments). The fourth most common overlap then was comments that contained both information on the content of the video and a

¹³⁶ A complete chart of the overlapping codes is available upon request.

positive impression of this information (overlap occurred in 40 percent of the possible comments, 3.3 percent of total comments). And the fifth most common overlap was made up of paraphrased descriptions of the clip's content and a Neutral impression of this content (overlap occurred in 39 percent of the possible comments, 2.8 percent of total comments).

Awkwardness, Perspective, and Identity

The final trend I want to present before entering into the discussion section is observing the frequency with which the two most common trends of Expression of Relation to Content (i.e. the codes identification, impression, and opinion), and Presentation of Information (i.e. the codes direct quote and paraphrase) occurred with each other and how often they occurred in relation to awkwardness (see chart). In addition to those common overlapping codes listed above (e.g. direct quote X

impressions,

paraphrase X

impression) I also

noted that across

comments, users

tend to relate more

positively/neutrally

	Awkardness	Summary/Direct Quote	Summary/Paraphrase
Awkardness	49	3	17
Identification/Neutral	10	4	14
Identification/Negative	0	0	0
Identification/Positive	1	1	3
Impression/Neutral	1	8	33
Impression/Negative	0	1	2
Impression/Positive	20	275	180
Opinion/Neutral	2	4	40
Opinion/Negative	0	1	3
Opinion/Positive	2	3	13

to the content of the clip and their perception of awkwardness therein. Notable above is that the mention of awkwardness was never associated with a negative impression, opinion, or identification. In fact, 41 percent of the mentions of awkwardness occurred with a positive impression of awkwardness. Additionally, 20 percent of the mentions of awkwardness coincided

with neutral identification. I will return and give salience to these trends in my discussion section below.

Discussion

The most obvious point of discussion that surfaces from these trends is the prominence of conversation centered on the content of *ABG* as opposed to the functions of YouTube. The relative lack of regard for the site design in relation to the content of *ABG*'s videos indicates two things. First, it indicates a sort of integrated experience of YouTube as part and parcel of *ABG*. As I mentioned above, the comments, the rating system, the scrawling related videos, etc. are integrated into a YouTube video through the site's infrastructure. Therefore, the viewer only takes note or comments on this design when it becomes dis-integrated, and therefore interrupts their viewing experience.¹³⁷ The integration of site features, like commenting processes, also invokes the relationship the episodes have with the comments that take place below it. Put another way, YouTube creates an archive of cultural citizenship for its viewers. Further, as described above, the interpretive community not only identifies with and crafts cultural citizenship, but they also do work to shape how the video itself is perceived.

Second, the predominance of conversation centered on the content of *ABG* suggests that viewers congregate around this text as an interpretive community. The interpretive community comments on content and shares impressions, opinions, and information they know about the clip or series. Moreover, as noted in the trends, viewers by and large express positive or neutral inclinations toward *ABG* or the content therein. This trend, viewed in combination with Gray's work, shows how interpretive communities shape the viewer's understanding and perspective of

¹³⁷ Paul Edwards, *Infrastructure and Modernity: Scales of Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems* (2002), 193, 220-221.

the YouTube clip. In other words, because these positive expressions of relation or observance are also the most upvoted, a viewer's interpretation of the clip they are watching is made up of these positive comments.

In addition to an interpretive community shaping others' viewing experiences, it is also noteworthy to examine and interrogate why users most often commented with "positive impressions" of *ABG*. Impressions, as described above, are short reactions to the content of the video or other comments. When considering that these users are in the 9 percent of "editors" addressed at the beginning of this chapter, one can speculate the reasons why users comment. Though I cannot know for sure the motivation for commenting on the videos, it is clear that by commenting, a user attaches their YouTube identity to *ABG*, thereby crafting a sort of cultural citizenship as *ABG*'s interpretive community. The expression of positive impression in relation to Rae's written rhetoric of unruliness (dreamscapes, voiceovers, and cutaways) suggests the cathartic relationship viewers have with Rae's unruliness and awkwardness. Therefore, specifically in reference to *ABG*, I posit that rhetoric of unruliness and awkwardness act as important political catalysts in the formation of cultural citizenship. Not only are viewers crafting cultural citizenship, but they are also celebrating the text that drew them together, thereby indirectly praising the shared traits and shared counter-hegemonic interpretations or positionalities. Moreover, the act of commenting in and of itself is a means of staking one's place within that community, which is a political act.

Another way I speculate that viewers express a relation to the content of *ABG* is through their expression of quotes or the summarizing of scenes. In my examination of most common codes, these were the second and third most common codes to appear, and they most often appeared alongside positive impressions, neutral opinions, neutral impressions, and neutral

identification. Notable, again, is the abundance of positive impressions viewers had of *ABG*'s content, with this overlap surfacing more than the rest of the top overlapping codes combined. These findings again demonstrate the celebration around Rae's works and performances. To reiterate, many of Rae's performances are centered on awkwardness and are catalyzed by awkwardness as a "demystifier" of power differentials. Therefore, users quoting these moments and scene, and then noting positive impressions alongside it imply a knowingness and appreciation of awkwardness as a Crunk feminist tool.

Also noteworthy in the above overlap is the amount of neutral observations, perspectives, and even expressions of identification. As mentioned in the previous chapters, ambivalence is central to Rae's performances and the enactment of awkward. By providing a neutral opinion or impression of the YouTube clips, users are both reacting to and re-enacting Rae's ambivalence. For example: "im on my kim k????? Whaaa." In this comment, the user is quoting a line from one of J's dreamscape rap sessions wherein she engages a rhetoric of unruliness by reacting to her crush's attempts at flirting with her. In this scene, J fails to recognize her crush's kidding banter as flirtation and, after a bit too long thinking he was serious, she bursts into laughter and the scene cuts to her rapping "N*ggas¹³⁸ love me, I'm on my Kim K."¹³⁹ In this quote, J is relating herself to Kim Kardashian, while simultaneously projecting an air of confidence despite her awkward interaction. Besides being considered one of the "sexiest" women in the world, it is unclear why J compares herself to Kardashian. Her choice of celebrity is ambivalent in reasoning, however salient is J's nonchalance to the awkwardness she performed in the previous

¹³⁸ To be clear, I do not use an asterisk here to censor Issa Rae as a Black woman. Rather I, as a white woman, view this quote as a re-contextualization of Rae's words in a work that will ultimately benefit my vocational advancement through academia. To avoid enacting further violence through its use, I have chosen to censor my use of it here.

¹³⁹ Issa Rae, "The Hallway," in *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, ed. Issa Rae Productions (2011), 4:22-4:25.

scene; she is on her Kim K whether she is awkward or not. By referencing J's choice of being on her "Kim K" and following the reference with "Whaaa," the commenter calls attention to the arbitrariness of the original line. "Whaaaa" does not indicate any particular positive or negative inclination toward the original line or scene.

Alternatively, in the "Kim K" comment about, the commenter could be referencing the lack of "social awareness" J's character has in reference to her awkwardness. In other words, J remains oblivious to her awkward interaction with her crush and instead remains focused on how desirable she is. Here Rae deploys J's awkwardness as an agentive rhetoric of unruliness. In her writing of this awkward moment, Rae makes clear that she understands this to be awkward for J. However, she notes the utter confidence J projects as a way for her to own her awkwardness. The commenter might be making reference to the disconnect between what is expected and what is reality, as discussed in the introductory chapter in reference to awkwardness, in this comment. Nonetheless, their comment is an (re)articulation of ambiguity; it is a response to a Crunk feminist rhetoric of unruliness via awkwardness. In this way, the commenter is also creating awkwardness through the ambiguity of their comment. Their intent is unclear, therefore if someone were to respond to them, their responder would have to take a guess on the intent of the original comment and respond accordingly. In any case, the lack of clarity momentarily throws social order into disarray; the pause awkwardness creates in communication encourages people to consider and analyze the video's content and weigh that against whether they think the original comment is more positively, negatively, or truly ambivalently inclined. The articulation is salient when understood alongside *ABG* as a purposefully ambivalent text, which complicates historical representation, tropes, and stereotypes of marginalized identities. An expression of

ambivalence from the commenter reflects a playfulness, or openness, Rae injected into the original portrayals and satiric commentary of *ABG*.

Finally, I turn to my interest in the cross-section of awkwardness, identity, impression, opinion, and content summary. As stated previously in this thesis, Issa Rae prefaces *ABG* by explaining that once somebody told her the two worst things she could be is awkward and Black. In my coding process, I became interested in how viewers interpreted, related to, or spoke about awkwardness. As my findings above show, viewers react positively (positive impression) to awkwardness in 41 percent of the comments that have mention of awkwardness. Moreover, viewers neutrally identify with awkwardness 20 percent of the times awkwardness is mentioned. In fact, viewers consistently express neutral identification more often than positive vis-à-vis awkwardness or the content of *ABG*. Meanwhile, users hold positive impressions of awkwardness and the content of *ABG* more often than neutral impressions. In other words, when identifying their personhood with the content of *ABG* or an observation of awkwardness, viewers tend to do so more neutrally or ambivalently.

However, in the absence of any reference to their identity, viewers see the content and performance of awkwardness as positive. In response to a scene wherein J is talking about her nerdy coworker who, after a drunken fling, continues to have eyes for J, one user comments: “Omg, this is my life. Except the whole shaving head thing lol. But everything else right up to saving the numbers of creepy stalkers as 'Do not answer' fits. Awkwardddd.” In this comment, the user expresses their identification to the content of *ABG* in a neutral sense (“Omg, this is my life”). They then reference a scene in the show with an attachment of positive impression. The commenter continues to describe content they neutrally identify with and conclude by commenting on the awkwardness of the situation. While awkward humor is viewed as an

entertaining and/or charged, this cannot be intrinsically correlated with positive identification. Though users may enjoy viewing displays of awkwardness, it may not be positively understood when they encounter it in their own lives. In the absence of interviews with these commenters, I speculate that neutrality of identification indicates that awkwardness does not necessarily serve a purpose in one's self-reflection. However, the abundance of positive implication in reference to awkwardness displays how viewers react to Rae's rhetoric of unruliness – that is, positively. In this way,

Salient to the conversation around awkwardness and *ABG* is that commenters never negatively identify with awkwardness or *ABG*, and awkwardness in general is never viewed as a negative aspect of the text. Therefore, awkwardness acts as a central trait to which cultural citizenship can attach itself. In other words, viewers are able to resignify a formerly negative trait (awkwardness) as a positive one, through which they find a mutual sense of belonging in their interpretive communities. The lack of negative identification, the presence of positive and neutral identification, and the predominance of positive and neutral impressions evidence awkwardness as a central characteristic around which interpretive communities can converse. In other words, the rhetoric of unruliness in the form of awkwardness on *ABG* is political in its ability to bring communities who otherwise might feel unseen together. Existing on YouTube creates an archive of cultural citizenship where members of this group can empathize, be seen, and feel understood.

Conclusion

By existing on YouTube, the site interface is structured in such a way that *ABG* cannot simply be understood as the content within the video pane, but also understood as a part of the fuller series, the collective project that is YouTube, a part of the conversation taking place below it (in the comments section), and in the related videos surrounding. These scrawling images and

texts also suggest further locations wherein the interpretive community, formed around *ABG*, might reach to in an alternative text. YouTube is a space where voices converge to create, share, edit, and audience. The chorus of opinions, interpretation, and expressions craft an interpretive community that, as I have expressed above, likely produces a type of cultural citizenship. As cultural citizens, users contribute to and further the understanding of the text in both the form of their opinions and through providing information about the text. By providing information about the content of *ABG*, commenters obtain cultural capital and further value the space where their knowledge is sought after (evidenced by the high amount of likes these comments receive).

Awkwardness is a galvanizing political tool, around which viewers of *ABG* find a shared sense of understanding and belonging. Interpretive communities gather around *ABG* and share their perception of the series. Moreover, their shared perspective then further shapes and “edits” Rae’s original text. As an interpretive community who has crafted cultural citizenship, viewers gain cultural capital and also give cultural capital to Rae and *ABG* through their positive attribution of value to the series.

This devotion and show of appreciation may have contributed to *ABG*’s move from YouTube to HBO, where it evolved into the hit series *Insecure*. The salience of YouTube’s fan community in this move rests around “Social TV,” or television consumption accompanied by online fan discourses supporting the text. However, in the case of YouTube, Social TV exists all on the same platform. In her analysis of *Scandal* as Social TV, Imani Cheers points out that *Scandal*’s new media presence from its “Gladiators,” fan community, is part of the reason for the show’s longevity.¹⁴⁰ In fact, critics report:

¹⁴⁰ Imani M. Cheers, *The Evolution of Black Women in Television: Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 79.

Without Twitter to boost its profile and then its ratings, "Scandal" probably would have been canceled. Instead, it's held up as an example of social media prowess by networks and branding experts of every stripe, and its success further stokes the belief that somehow Twitter can save us all.¹⁴¹

Black women not only participate in furthering the public cultural understanding of the show, but they might literally be keeping it on the air. In relation to *ABG*, the community that congregated around the text not only kept it going through a Kickstarter fund, but their archive of overwhelming support undoubtedly buttressed Rae's pitch to HBO. Rae was able to walk into this meeting with evidence that this show – a show about a Black woman's awkwardness and insecurity – has a fan community who can relate to it.

In this chapter, I have examined the show of support and the reinterpretation of awkwardness among *ABG*'s community. In future research, I intend to examine more closely fan interactions, especially when dissenting or "trolling" voices enter into the community conversation. However, for now it is clear that not only is the episode itself working to alter understandings within viewers, but viewers also alter the meaning of texts simultaneously. In this way, the entire *ABG* community declares their cultural citizenship and crafts counter-hegemony separate from mainstream media. It enacts Crunk Feminism by centering the marginalized voices and experiences as pointedly agentive. These voices use YouTube's platform affordances to create, promote, and shape the meaning of *ABG*. In my next chapter, I perform a rhetorical analysis of *ABG* paying specific mind to Rae's enactments of awkwardness and the rhetoric of unruliness. In my concluding chapter, I fuse the findings of these two chapters and discuss its further implications.

¹⁴¹ Mary McNamara, "'Scandal' Has Become Must-Tweet TV," Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/may/11/entertainment/la-et-st-scandal-abc-social-media-20130511>.

Appendix:

Coding of *ABG* episodes

Episode	Title	Theme	# Of Comments	# Of Liked Comments
S1E1	The Stop Sign	Office	1391	0
S1E2	The Job	Office	1815	2
S1E3	The Hallway	Social Life	866	2
S1E4	The Icebreaker	Office	1290	0
S1E5	The Dance	Social Life	2303	6
S1E6	The Stapler	Office	2082	1
S1E7	The Date	Dating	3003	0
S1E8	The Project	Office/Dating	2938	0
S1E9	The Happy Hour	Dating/Social Life	2173	0
S1E10a	The Unexpected	Social Life	2408	10
S1E10b	The Unexpected	Office/Dating	1833	7
S1E11	The Exes	Dating/Social Life	4883	2
S1E12	The Decision	Finale	4102	0
S2E1	The Sleepover	Dating	2975	25
S2E2	The Visit	Social Life/Dating	2426	29
S2E3	The Jingle	Office	1931	33
S2E4	The Search	Dating/Office	1702	35
S2E5	The Interview	Office	1504	21
S2E6	The Waiter	Dating	3061	41
S2E7	The Group	Office	1343	40
S2E8	The Friends	Dating	2462	35
S2E9	The Check	Social Life	1292	30
S2E10	The Call	Social Life/Dating	1333	43
S2E11a	The Apology	Dating/Office	1220	17
S2E11b	The Change	Finale	2278	24

Codebook

Category	Code	Description/Example
<i>ABG</i> Specific Codes		This category is made up of codes that surfaced through observed trends in comments or themes of interest I created.
	Awkwardness	This code is present whenever a user makes any reference the word awkward. E.g. “This was the most painfully awkward episode yet! Love it!” / “That awkward moment when you don't know whether to close the video or keep watching.”
	Identification	This is a parent code for the following codes. It is present whenever a user makes reference to identifying with experiences of the characters.
	<i>Positive</i>	This code is present whenever a user expresses positive sentiment in reference to their identification as/with something in the video. Notable here is that while the comment might have a positive impression or opinion, if the positive inclination did not explicitly link to the identification, it was not counted as “Positive Identification” E.g. “Issa you are an inspiration to many awkward woman of color. ... FINALLY A CHARACTER I CAN RELATE TO ON SO MANY DIFFERENT LEVELS #dope”
	<i>Negative</i>	This code is present whenever a user expresses negative sentiment in reference to their identification as/with something in the video. This code never occurred and thus I do not have an exemplar comment to supply.
	<i>General</i>	This code is present whenever users express identification but either make no

		<p>inclination as to whether the user observes their identification as a positive or negative attribute OR when the comment is ambivalent and therefore I am unable to determine the user's inclination.</p> <p>E.g. "i am so awkward i felt awkward watching this" / "OMG!! Looove this show. I AM awkward black girl, hahahahahaha."¹⁴²</p>
	Liked	<p>This code is used to distinguish when comments have been "liked" or "upvoted" by other users. It is not determined by the content of the comment.</p>
	Need for Representation	<p>This code is present whenever a user comments on the unique representation of characters in <i>ABG</i> and calls for an increased number of these representations.</p> <p>E.g. "We (Black women) need more of these shows. Shows like these show how neglected we are as a demographic. This is honestly the first time I've seen a black women highlighted in a normal and relate-able fashion. Hence why I take it upon myself to spread the word on this series (facebook, twitter, my blog, and any other medium I have)."</p>
	Representation	<p>This code is present whenever a user comments on the unique representation of characters in <i>ABG</i> or discusses the representations in relation to their ideological construction outside of the text.</p> <p>E.g. "Products such as the BET network and Ebony magazine are representations of the of the African-American identity. It's a mirror for most to identify with."</p>
	Team Fred	<p>This code surfaced in vivo as a trend in</p>

¹⁴² This second comment exemplifies positive impression ("OMG!! Looove this show.") and Neutral identification ("I AM awkward black girl").

		<p>comments. It is present whenever a user expresses they are “Team Fred.” Its salience is in the intra-community discourse. Viewers created “teams” angling for which partner J should choose.</p> <p>E.g. “Team Fred!!!”</p>
	Team White Jay	<p>This code surfaced in vivo as a trend in comments. It is present whenever a user expresses they are “Team White Jay.” Its salience is in the intra-community discourse. Viewers created “teams” angling for which partner J should choose.</p> <p>E.g. “#TeamWhiteJay”</p>
	TV	<p>This code is present whenever a user expresses they believe <i>ABG</i> should be a television show because of its various merits and contribution. It is also present when users express that they believe it should <i>not</i> be on television and should remain on YouTube.</p> <p>E.g. “this needs to be tv series” / “I hope Hollywood doesn't try to turn this into a tv show because they would completely ruin it. I like how everyone on here looks like normal people. On a tv version everyone would look like freaking models and they'd just ruin the whole thing.”</p>
Advice		<p>This category consists of codes in which users request or give advice to other YouTubers.</p>
	Give Comments	<p>This code is present whenever a user gives others advice. It is generally a response to a request for advice. It differs from opinions because opinion comments generally simply giving an opinion on the content of <i>ABG</i>, whereas giving advice is explicitly recommending action to others.</p> <p>E.g. “Repeated hallway sightings:</p>

		Things to say: 1st,smile and say hi, 2nd hey are you following me? 3rd hey haven't I seen you somewhere before? 4th Dejavu, 5th we've got to stop meeting like this (chuckle), 6th awkward unfriendly half-smile, 7th - cringed forced smile, 8th - call 911 you are being stalked.”
	Recommend another video	This code is present whenever a user comments a recommendation for another video that viewers would enjoy. E.g. “If u like this try the ‘Psycho Girlfriend’ series its hilarious”
	Request Comments	This code is present whenever a user requests advice from other viewers. It differs from a request for opinions in that a request for advice does not explicitly refer to the content of the show, but rather could be requesting practical advice on the site’s processes. E.g. “What [sic] can't I view this episode? :/”
Expression of Personal Feelings		This category consists of codes wherein users note how the episode made them react emotionally.
	Positive	This code is present whenever a user expresses positive feelings (or that the episode has affected them positively) about the episode of the content therein. E.g. “I love how this episode is a sort of montage to the neighborhood I grew up in. I grew up off manchester right there by the great western forum...Awesome!”
	Negative	This code is present whenever a user expresses negative feelings (or that the episode has affected them negatively) about the episode of the content therein. E.g. “so depressing!”
	General	This code is present whenever a user expresses ambivalent feelings (or that the episode has affected them

		both/neither positively or negatively) about the episode of the content therein. E.g. “No lie this awkward date makes me feel 13 again”
General Conversation		This category consists of utterances that work to create or maintain common aspects of conversation between users. These comments might relate to the content of the video, but they do not have to necessarily.
	Anecdotes	This code is present whenever users tell of their personal experiences. Sometimes it is in relation to the content of the clip, but this is not a necessity. E.g. “Today I put the volume up when Darius spoke to see if he was really saying something understandable. I thought maybe he was saying non-sensical words-kinda like Charlie Brown adults.”
	Anticipate	This code is present when users express an excitement about future events. These comments refer to things that are “in the works” so to speak, rather than a hypothetical hope or wish(which is how they differ from Express Plans/Desires/Wishes. They are seeking to express intention in reference to future actions, and not react to past (which is how they differ from Expressions of personal feelings). E.g. “I look fwd to what she is going to have on her head next episode,lol!! YAY 2 EPISODES IN OCTOBER!!! I AM HAVING THE SHAKES FROM THE ANTICIPATION!”
	Express Plans/Desires/Wishes	This code is present when the user expresses a future plan or hope that they have. This utterance could be in reference to the video and the users experience of it, or it could be in reference to how the clip relates to their

		<p>lives or experiences.</p> <p>E.g. “i’m mixed, and i wish there was an equivalent for us!”</p>
	Give Personal Information	<p>This code is present when commenters give details about themselves regarding their name, occupation or physical characteristics.</p> <p>E.g. “I love how this episode is a sort of montage to the neighborhood I grew up in. I grew up off manchester right there by the great western forum...Awesome!”</p>
	Jokes	<p>This code is present when commenters make references or utterances that are intended to be humorous. It is not present when commenters restate jokes from within the text, but rather when they make their own joke.</p> <p>E.g. “Why she couldn’t just have both of them..jk”</p>
	Status Description	<p>This code is present whenever the commenter expresses action they are taking as a result or during the watching of the episode. It differs from Express Plans/Desires/Wishes because it centers on how the clip implored viewers to physically react. It also differs from Expression of Personal feelings because, again, it is centered on the physical rather than emotional reaction.</p> <p>E.g. “Did anyone else have to pause the video during the beginning of the date just so you could recuperate from the awkwardness?”</p>
	Thanking	<p>This code is present whenever the commenter thanks another user or the creator of the video.</p> <p>E.g. “thankyou ms. issa rae”</p>
Impression		<p>This category is complete with codes that indicate viewers’ reactions to videos or comments. They are generally short and immediate without much substance. This category differs from that of</p>

		“Opinion” because opinion codes tend to reflect longer comments with more substance and thought. They give more detail and evidence of the user’s reaction. These codes are further break down into Positive Impression, Negative Impression, and Neutral Impression.
	Positive	This code is present when a user comments a short reaction with positive sentiments. E.g. “lol”/“:D”/“so good!!!”
	Negative	This code is present when a user comments a short reaction with negative sentiments. E.g. “Ewww!”/ “:(”/“boring”
	Neutral	This code is present when a user comments a short reaction with ambivalent sentiments, or I am unable to determine whether the sentiment is positive or negative. E.g. “wow!”/ “OMG” / “wtf!”
Information		This category is made of codes that request or provide factual information about something in the video content, video context, or a tangentially unrelated topic.
	Give	This is a parent subcategory of three of the following codes. These codes are present when the user makes a direct statement that provides factual information to other users. This code grouping is salient because of its relation to cultural capital. Namely, I forward that by providing information, users’ voices take on a sort of validity and value that they might otherwise not have.
	<i>Content</i>	This code is present when a user makes explicit reference to something in the video and further provides information

		about that which they reference. E.g. “LMAO that reference to LOVE & Basketball ... IDIED!”
	<i>Context</i>	This code is present when a user makes reference to something related to the video and further provides information about that which they reference. E.g. “Yall know Amir is like a prince right! Like a legit prince!”
	<i>General</i>	This code is present when a user makes provides information that isn’t explicitly connected to the content or context of the video but rather deals with larger cultural discourses, etc. E.g. “Products such as the BET network and Ebony magazine are representations of the of the African-American identity. It's a mirror for most to identify with.”
	Make Comparison	This code is present whenever the user makes a comparison between this clip and another show or clip. The comparison could be in reference to the context or content of the show. E.g. “This reminds me of Everybody Hates Chris lol”
	Request	This code is present whenever a user makes a request for information in regard to the content or context of the video. Generally it is in reference to a song that is playing or who a certain character is. E.g. “5:42 what's the song??”
Opinion		This category encompasses codes wherein users request or give their perspectives on the video or on other comments. These comments are generally more robust than an impression comment in that they will give evidence for their claims. This category differs from the advice category in that it opinions do not have an explicit aim of persuasion. They also

		differ from information in that the opinions expressed are by definition subjective information.
	Give	This is a parent subcategory of three of the following codes. These codes are present when the user states an opinion on the content of or relating to the clip.
	<i>Positive</i>	This code is present when a user states a subjective claim with a positive spin on their expressed point-of-view. E.g. "It sucks that the internet cesspit has been shitting on this series. Don't let it get you down because ABG is great-relatable, funny and well-written!"
	<i>Negative</i>	This code is present when a user states a subjective claim with a negative spin on their expressed point-of-view. E.g. "never make a nother video ever again this isnt even funny. this is what happens when women try comedy"
	<i>General</i>	This code is present when a user states a subjective claim, which I was unable to determine. E.g. "how she says \'harassment\' is making me uncomfortable"
	Compliment	This code is present whenever a user compliments a particular person. It generally focuses on the attributes of the particular person. E.g. "Every actor here is very talented." / "Her skin looks so radiant! Love her!"
	Criticism	This code is present when a user critiques a particular aspect within the clip. Though similar to Giving a Negative Opinion, this does not give a negative perspective on the entire clip. It focuses on one feature and may offer advice on how to improve. E.g. "hate the use of the n-word tho"
	Insults	This code is present whenever a user

		critiques a user or the series/content with the perceived intent to do harm. They do not usually have substantial reasoning behind the critique, differing these comments from Criticism or Negative Opinion. E.g. “How can people stand this terrible acting?” / “what a shitty sketch”
	Request Opinion	This code is present when the comment asks for the perspective of other viewers. It might be in reference to something within or tangentially related to the clip. E.g. “did anyone else wonder how J and CeCe made it all day wearing a trash bag and didn't dehydrate or sweat to death? great episode! can't wait till dec 1st - payday and a new episode of ABG”
	Speculate	This code is present whenever a user comments on their beliefs on what is to come in the next videos or they guess as to the motivations of the characters within the clip they just watched. E.g. “I predict baby voice Darius blowing up on somebody... and A getting Lasik and relaxing his face... :)”
Responses to Previous Comments		This category is made up of codes that users address other viewers and respond to what they have said. They might have @ symbols present, meaning they are addressing one user in particular, or they might address a perceived audience of commenters.
	Agree	This code is present when a user makes note of their agreement with another commenter and adds to the previous comment with their own perception. E.g. “@Roylanalove lol i was up until 4am by the time i finished all the episodes and i was like oh man theres no more!!!! so depressing! we need good shows like that on TV!!!”
	Confirm	Similar to Agree, this code is present

		<p>when a user supports the comment of another user. However, it differs in that it does not add additional supplemental information.</p> <p>E.g. “Oh found it. awkward.....”</p>
	Disagree	<p>This code is present when a user is responding to a comment with which they disagree. It is generally made of a disagreeing utterance, and then a sentence or two to clarify what they disagree with.</p> <p>E.g. “@Latoya Kurtis You shouldn't hate anyone based on their skin color.”</p>
	Challenge	<p>This code is present, like disagree, when a user disagrees with a previous comment. However, unlike disagree, these comments generally construct an argument that confronts the beliefs expressed in the original comment.</p> <p>E.g. “@magicalhearingman No one said that blacks should get special treatment but maybe you could be a little more sensitive to the subject? If you're friends mom died, would you not be more sensitive towards him? Even though you didn't do it and you don't agree with it? Now imagine if YOUR parents were the one to kill his parents. How do you think he'd feel? Not saying you have to kiss his ass. But that's a very significant event that needs to be understood.”</p>
	General	<p>This code is present when the comment does not fall into any of the above codes, or the meaning behind the interaction is not clear and therefore I was unable to place it in any of the categories above.</p> <p>E.g. “@teachmehowtostewie I responded to the wrong person. lol sorry. Im glad you explained it beacuse I didnt catch what they were going as.”</p>
Site Processes		<p>This category is made of codes in which users make reference to or give opinion</p>

		on site design, features, and interface that affect their experience of ABG.
	Rating features	This code is present when a user mentions the “like” or “upvote” features of the video or other comments. E.g. “2 dislikes...must have hit the wrong button!”
	Profiles and Subscriptions	This code is present when users make reference to their profile, the clip’s host profile, or the act of “following” (subscribing to) the series. E.g. “Definitely a new subscriber!”
	Commenting Process	This code is present whenever users make reference to the act of commenting or the features accessible in commenting on a YouTube video. E.g. “YouTube needs to make a system where if you talking racist and other crap in comments u cant post it. I see about a thousand comments talking crap like someones going to read it! Shut up!!!”
	Request Posting Another Video	This code is present when a user asks for another video from the creator. E.g. “I neeeeeeed another video. more!!”
	Suggest Content for Future Videos	This code is present whenever a user asks for specific content to be in future videos or when they request for specific content to not appear in future videos. E.g. “No more White Jay :(” / “please no more homophobia”
Video Content Description		This category encompasses codes wherein users quote the video content, make reference to specific timestamps, or scenes within the clip. Comments can refer to visual or audio content.
	Direct Quote	This code is present when the user makes reference to a direct quote or a timestamp. It is often accompanied by an evaluative clause, giving some

		<p>inclination as to how the user feels about this quote.</p> <p>E.g. “LMBO @ 2:29” / ““Did I do that?’ on A's shirt LOL” / “I will not approve overtime’ ‘Well shit I'm out this bitch!’”</p>
	Paraphrase	<p>This code is present when the user describes a scene. It is often accompanied by an evaluative clause, giving some inclination as to how the user feels about this scene.</p> <p>E.g. “When the boss lady comes in with cornrows lmfar0” / “ayeeeeee shoutout to that frank ocean ‘thinking about you’ my jammmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm”</p>

I'm awkward and black. Someone once told me those were the two worst things anyone can be. That someone was right. - *ABG* Season One, Episode One

(Mis-)Adventuring, Awkwardness, and Ambivalence

In both her memoir and her critically-acclaimed, semi-autobiographical web series, *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, Issa Rae puts forward the challenges she has faced as being both awkward and Black. She invokes the problems that an awkward, Black woman may run into when met with assumptions, stereotypes, and discriminatory actions that (1) she does not identify with, (2) she outwardly disagrees with, and (3) she cannot seem to dispute because of her social anxiety and double-binded positionality. Rae also hints at an idea of intersectional identities. In the title of her memoir and web series, she explicitly refers to at least three distinct intersections of her representation: Awkward (ability vis-à-vis mental health and social anxiety), Black (race and ethnicity), Girl (gender, and potentially the implication of age/maturity).

Her foregrounded reference to the complexity of her identity contrasts with shallow representations of Black womanhood that Rae has written and spoken about. As mentioned in my introductory chapter, Rae felt herself both unrepresented and felt a distinct misrepresentation of Black women in mainstream media. The struggle over the signification of Black womanhood is tied to societal discrimination, material harm, and psychological effects in young, Black women. It also indicates the structural strain Black women have encountered in regard to media industries. The Internet, access to production technologies, and social media affordances catalyzed grassroots forms of self-representation on an international stage.

As I argued earlier, Rae negotiates the landscape of historical and contemporary representations of Black women using awkwardness and the rhetoric of unruliness. In this chapter, I observe Rae's satirical subversion, mobilized ambivalence, and use of YouTube as her

platform in her struggle over the signification of Blackness, womanhood, and awkwardness. Issa Rae enacts Crunk Feminism and unruliness respectively and simultaneously through her use of platform(s) and in the rhetorical tactics present both in the context and content of *ABG*. In her use of YouTube, in her writing, and in her performance of J, I examine how Rae centers her voice and perspective thereby absurdifying those voices that previously created stereotypes of Black women. I begin my analysis examining how YouTube, as a platform, provided Rae an unruly avenue to enact Crunk Feminism (wielding technology). I follow this examination with a brief explanation of how Rae's rhetoric of unruliness and awkwardness act as charge humor, which fosters the cultural citizenship expressed in the previous chapter. I then perform a rhetorical analysis of key moments of awkward and rhetoric of unruliness in *ABG*. I focus on Issa Rae's rhetorical deployment of dreamscapes, flash-forwards/-backs, and narrative voice over as enactments of Crunk Feminism and unruliness.

I argue that in centering herself, Rae enacts Crunk Feminism by creating a complex character. Rae's rhetoric of unruliness further complicate normative, monolithic messages of Black womanhood that rely on the traditional lens of white, male creative executives. Before performing my analysis, I examine literature on YouTube, its exigence, platform affordances, and structural aspects. I then move to explain the history of *ABG* in relation to its appearance on YouTube. I conclude by discussing how the use of satire, awkwardness, and unruliness thrive on platforms like YouTube that provide an inherently communicative space for viewers.

Broadcast Your-Awkward-self: An Overview of YouTube

Born in 2005, YouTube is a video-sharing, social media site consisting of user-generated videos. The site hosts a diverse group of video genres, ranging from music videos, vlogs (video blogs), news broadcasts, excerpts from mainstream cinema or television shows, short films,

documentaries, how-to's, and web series. Conversations on the political economy and its deeply entrenched interaction with users/producers typically splits itself into two categories: (1) YouTube as radically utopic, and (2) YouTube as providing unique affordances while existing and abiding by the "rules" of its capitalist system. A third, more inconclusive understanding of YouTube brings us closer to my view of YouTube's function. The site is ambivalently unique, made up in part of both of the previous constructions mentioned.

With the slogan "Broadcast Yourself," YouTube became an Internet sensation and site for self-expression. A year into its life, YouTube was acquired by Google on November 13, 2006. However, though it is housed under the tech giant Google, YouTube "is not produced solely or even predominantly by top-down activities of YouTube, Inc. as a company. Rather, various forms of cultural, social, and economic values are collectively produced by users *en masse*, via their consumption, evaluation, and entrepreneurial activities."¹⁴³ YouTube is largely understood as an alternative form of media distribution and consumption, juxtaposed by its media industry predecessor. Those who view YouTube as a pointedly radical platform that is of the people and for the people typically focus in on the broadcasting capacity that YouTube affords "everyday" voices. In their foundational piece on YouTube and digital and participatory cultures, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green forward that the advent and evolution of YouTube demonstrates "the increasingly complex relations among producers and consumers in the creation of meaning, value, and agency. There is no doubt it is a site of cultural and economic disruption."¹⁴⁴ In other words, YouTube suggests a space where the line between the "producer" of cultural knowledge and its "consumer" is blurred, an idea I examine more in my third chapter on the reception of YouTube.

¹⁴³ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *Youtube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge;Malden, MA;: Polity, 2009), 5.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 14.

YouTube is a space where dominant hegemony and counter-hegemony clash and thus produce an ambivalent politics, made up of resistance and dominant ideology.¹⁴⁵ Burgess and Green state that YouTube created a shift in cultural logics within the United States. They forward that YouTube, as a digital space, operates on two plains in relation to popular culture; “part amateur production, part creative consumption.”¹⁴⁶ Building on this, Bernard Stiegler argues that YouTube exemplifies a break from the Frankfurt School’s theory of “cultural industry” in mainstream media. Ishida rather forwards YouTube as a “cultural technology”;¹⁴⁷ the focus shifts to the tools, rather than the system, used to craft individualized cultures. William Uricchio notes that YouTube “stands as an important site of cultural aggregation, whether we consider mash-ups in the narrow sense ... or the site as a totality.”¹⁴⁸ In their respective works, Stiegler and Uricchio highlight YouTube’s postmodern affordances of agency, counter-hegemony and/or isonomy, and the ease of connection to participatory cultures.

However, the democratizing belief that “anybody with an idea and access to technology can be heard on YouTube” is tempered by its economic functioning. In analysis of mass media and YouTube, Anandam Kavoori highlights that in order for texts to be intelligible, they must conform to the confines of the structure in which they exist.¹⁴⁹ The structure “constrain[s] the activities into a standard mode of action, even if the activities may also mold their conditions and thereby alter their mode.”¹⁵⁰ Kavoori continues to note the aspects of the structure, which affect people’s communicative actions, consist of “media industry’s production and distribution machinery, its ownership and legal regulation, the output of media representations, the contexts

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴⁷ Bernard Stiegler, "The Carnival of the New Screen: From Hegemony to Isonomy," in *The Youtube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 41.

¹⁴⁸ William Uricchio, "The Future of a Medium Once Known as Television," *ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴⁹ Anandam Kavoori, "Making Sense of Youtube," *Global Media Journal* 13, no. 24 (2015), 18.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 18.

of reception as well as genre-related and other conventions of meaning-making.”¹⁵¹ The Web, and YouTube in particular, is no exception to this rule.

Burgess and Green question the liberatory capacity of YouTube.¹⁵² In their works, they posit that through generic categorization, commercialization, forced compliance with copyright policies (enforced by the removal of these videos that break copyright, or the disabling of monetization features), and YouTube’s invested and evident interest of advertisers, the site privileges those videos with monetizable content.¹⁵³ In order for content to be eligible for YouTube monetization, users must meet the minimum following requirements:

Your content is advertiser-friendly. You created the content or have permission to use it commercially. You are able to provide documentation proving you own commercial rights to all audio and video content. Your content complies with YouTube Partner Program policies, YouTube’s Terms of Service, and Community Guidelines. YouTube reserves the right to disable monetization for accounts that do not follow our guidelines.¹⁵⁴

More obscure content that evades easy categorization or “professional guidelines” is less likely to be seen. YouTube, perforce, is an ambivalent space: “The dialectics of commerce and community, copyrighted material and user-generated content, and the way video is being distributed all relate to economic features of so-called emergent social-network markets” and

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵² Burgess and Green.

¹⁵³ Jean Burgess, "Youtube and the Formalisation of Amateur Media," in *Amateur Media: Social, Cultural and Legal Perspectives*, ed. Dan Hunter (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2013), 53-58. Burgess and Green.

¹⁵⁴ YouTube, "Video Monetization Criteria - Youtube Help," Google, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/97527?hl=en>.

render YouTube a hybrid economy.¹⁵⁵ YouTube exists as a site of both cultural aggregation, complete with non-normative, creative endeavors and expressions, *and* a site scaffolded by existing structures of intellectual property, copywritten material, and corporate advertising.

A full investigation of YouTube's political economy is beyond the scope of this project. It is salient, however, to understand YouTube as part of a larger system, and therefore necessarily not a radical break, but rather a fissure in the creation and distribution of media content. Nonetheless, much like YouTube's content cannot be divorced from its surrounding system, the unruly woman "cannot simply reject these conventions [that dictate the image of femininity in the public imaginary] and invent new 'untainted' ones in their place."¹⁵⁶ Paralleling the discourses of a YouTuber who produces creative content not often seen on television or in film, the unruly woman "learn[s] the languages [she] inherit[s], with their inescapable contradictions, before transforming and redirecting them toward [her] end."¹⁵⁷ In what follows, I analyze how Rae's use of awkwardness renders her as an unruly woman who "transgresses boundaries and steps out of her proper place."¹⁵⁸

Charged Satire and Cultural Citizenship

In my introductory chapter, I define cultural citizenship as satire with a focus on identity. Krefting explains the significance of identity in charged humor in its relation to cultural citizenship:

¹⁵⁵ Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, *The Youtube Reader*, vol. 12; (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 12.

¹⁵⁶ Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, 1st ed. (Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 1995), 3.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

Charged humor expands what constitutes cultural citizenship and places importance on the way performance and fine arts can shape our sense of self— reflecting who we are in what ways that confer value and worth or reflecting who we are in what ways that signal inferiority. Like other methods of engendering cultural citizenship, charged humor redresses the balance, compels action, and highlights the historical and contemporary struggles, double standards, and disenfranchisement experienced by minorities.¹⁵⁹

In other words, charged humor is located in the politics of identity formation and appreciation. It is aimed at “empowering otherwise marginalized social identities, a means of locating and asserting oneself within a specific social, cultural, and political matrix in order to counteract inequitable treatment, develop community, acquire rights, build identity, and experience is sense of shared cultural belonging.”¹⁶⁰

Charged humor resignifies the ways cultural identities are constructed in the broader public imaginary by “taking control of a public image created by others to maintain hierarchies.”¹⁶¹ This function aligns well with emancipatory racial humor. Jonathan Rossing speaks about this in his understanding of emancipatory racial humor; it “offers a disarming pedagogical strategy... [it] functions as a critical public pedagogy or ‘pedagogy of disruption’ that struggles against the dominant discourses sustaining racist hegemony.”¹⁶² Building off of Rossing’s work with respect to Black feminist thought, I suggest that Black women engage their experiences through satire not only to enact critical public pedagogy, but to simultaneously create theory and educate on this theory. It is a theory that is grounded in experience and the

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶¹ Krefling, 18.

¹⁶² Jonathan P. Rossing, "Emancipatory Racial Humor as Critical Public Pedagogy: Subverting Hegemonic Racism: Emancipatory Racial Humor," *Communication, Culture & Critique* (2015), 615.

specific ways of knowing developed through their positionality within both a white, hetero-patriarchal capitalist nation and within predominantly patriarchal Black cultures.

In addition, when put in conversation with my previous chapter, I argue that Rae's use of charged humor in the form of awkwardness and the rhetoric of unruliness fosters the existence of cultural citizenship evidence by my quantitative content analysis in the previous chapter. Put another way, Rae's deployment of awkwardness acts as a politically galvanizing and cathartic tool. Through the navigating capacity of awkwardness and embodied rhetoric of unruliness, Rae performs emancipatory racial humor; she creates grounded theory; and she spurs conversation of the dominant representations of Black women in the U.S. imaginary.

The Digital Adventures of Awkward Black Girl

Rae brings life to her character, J, through humanizing awkwardness. J's awkwardness serves as an invitation to her audience to empathize with her. The embarrassment described in the introduction of this thesis is an experience with which nearly anyone can identify. Everyone has had a moment where they enacted, experienced, or observed awkwardness, followed by a brief moment of first- or second-hand shame. Rae's YouTube mockumentary series is an archive for J's fictional, yet relatable, awkward moments. Made up of two seasons, twenty-three episodes, *ABG* originated as an idea Rae had for a program simply depicting the awkward and uncomfortable scenarios experienced through interacting with other humans. However, reading Leslie Pitterson's "Where is the Black Liz Lemon?"¹⁶³, which centered on the lack of intersectionality in the *rise of the female nerd*, catalyzed her idea into production.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Leslie Pitterson, "Where's the Black Version of Liz Lemon?," *The Grio*, 2010-04-19 2010.

¹⁶⁴ Issa Rae, interview by Fredricka Witfield, November 5, 2011, 2011.

In an interview with Larry King, Rae notes the influence of Jerry Seinfeld (*Seinfeld*, 1989-1998) and Larry David (*Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*), both known for their cringe comedy on everyday life, had on her own comedic voice:

Their sense of humor, just in terms of making the mundane, and the ordinary, the relatable extremely funny, I love that. ... Something my family and ... I love to joke about are just our observations of people. And they [Seinfeld and David] observe people and behaviors so, so well. And I just wanted to do that about what I observed of Black people, and the workplace, and just other experiences that I've had.¹⁶⁵

Rae repeatedly states the influence David's comedy has had on her, in particular looking at *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (CYE).¹⁶⁶ She recalls that even though CYE and *Seinfeld* are seen as very "white" shows, that does not mean their humor cannot and did not reach Black audiences.¹⁶⁷ Further, in an interview with *TIME*, Rae notes the parallels she worked to draw between CYE and her own humor: "I'm not Jewish, and there's a lot of stuff that's [culturally] specific to that show that I didn't get, that I had to look up! And that's fine—I still enjoyed the show. I feel that way about our show."¹⁶⁸ Rae forwards that though the cultural differences change the content of the jokes, observation of human interaction, complete with contradictions and everyday misunderstandings, is rife with material for awkward humor.

As Regina N. Bradley notes, "Rae's use of humor is particularly fitting for teasing out the complexities of contemporary black women, especially for millennials who are swept up in the

¹⁶⁵ interview by Larry King, August 9, 2017, 2017, 0:03-0:37.

¹⁶⁶ Arianna Davis, "An Awkward Black Girl Interviews Fellow Awkward Black Girl Issa Rae," *Refinery29* (2016), <https://www.refinery29.com/2016/10/125615/issae-rae-bio-insecure-hbo>., Rae, "Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David's Impact on Issa Rae.", Daniel D'Addario, "Issa Rae on Her Show Insecure: 'This Is Not the Quintessential Black-Woman Experience'," *TIME*, September 1, 2016 2016., Helena Andrews, "Embracing the Awkward, One Webisode at a Time," (2011), <https://www.theroot.com/embracing-the-awkward-one-webisode-at-a-time-1790864667>.

¹⁶⁷ Rae, "Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David's Impact on Issa Rae.", 0:44-1:29.

¹⁶⁸ D'Addario.

current women's desperation to be color-blind and remain aloof to racial disparities and privileges."¹⁶⁹ Rae embraces the ambivalence of being a Black, millennial woman. I posit additionally that awkwardness enacts Crunk feminist praxis of grounded ambivalence, but also performing embodied unruliness within ambivalence and shades of gray. Through awkwardness, Rae targets the ambivalence of her identity, performs the ambivalence of inter- and intra-generational Black discourses, and ultimately presents a kind of feminism that, as Hip-Hop feminist foremother Joan Morgan called for, "is brave enough to fuck with the grays."¹⁷⁰

My method of analysis in this chapter is rhetorical criticism, informed by Chapter Two as previously stated. However, before I begin my analysis, I feel it important to note the process of writing this chapter as it has evolved into my thesis. In my first attempt to write it, I based many of my arguments on Black women's representation on the writings found within the academy. In the process of writing this thesis, I decided that rather than simply relying on materials from within the academy to inform my analytical framework, that I would begin by working to understand how *ABG*'s viewers perceive this representation of Black womanhood.¹⁷¹ It was (and is) my hope that, by educating myself on the perspective of the audience, I create a fusion of theory made of both the writings within the academy and outside the academy.

I more thoroughly addressed audience perspective in Chapter Two, though my examination of YouTube comments has intrinsically informed the selection of episodes and themes analyzed in this chapter. The episodes I choose to evaluate in this chapter are season one's "The Job" (with the theme of work), season one's "The Date" (with the theme of dating), and

¹⁶⁹ Regina N. Bradley, "Awkwardly Hysterical: Theorizing Black Girl Awkwardness and Humor in Social Media," *Comedy Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015), 149.

¹⁷⁰ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 59.

¹⁷¹ I hypothesized that *ABG*'s viewers saw *ABG* as a representational iteration of themselves. After analyzing comments from 2011-2013 on *ABG*'s season 1 and 2 episodes on YouTube, 5.63 percent of the comments consist of explicit identification or sense of representation with Rae's character, J.

season two's "The Friends" (with the theme of dating). I selected these episodes as a result of evaluating which themes (work, dating, or social life) were most commented on within the two most common categories (dating: 25 percent, and work: 24 percent), as explained in the previous chapter. From there, I selected the scenes that best illustrate the trends and discussions referenced in Chapter Two. Through this process, my analysis has, indeed, stepped more assuredly into the shade(s) of gray. In a way, I perform my own sort of Crunk feminist praxis in this thesis by grounding my theoretical framework and themes of analysis in the perspectives of *ABG*'s viewership rather than strictly applying my own viewpoint removed from the community's creation of *ABG* as a collaborative text.

In the following analysis, I begin by examining the contextual and editorial factors of *ABG* that contribute to its awkward and unruliness. I then examine Rae's embrace of awkward ambivalence in reference to how she navigates stereotypes and invokes historical and contemporary issues of colorism, homophobia, and interracial relationships. Finally, I examine how she enacts Crunk Feminism through moments of awkwardness as a form of the rhetoric of unruliness.

Ambivalence and Context: Creating Awkwardness that can "F*ck with the Grays"

Rae catalyzes not only her scripts but also contextual and subtextual elements surrounding *ABG* to enact unruliness. In addition to her knowing donning of "Awkward Black Girl," described in the introductory chapter, another element of subtextual subversion presents through the show's editing tactics and platform. YouTube is known as a place of amateur production and broadcast. Amateur-grade production of *ABG* lends itself to a form of authenticity. A full discussion of the philosophical grounding of what is considered authentic versus inauthentic is passed the scope of this project, however notable here is the appeal to

authentic aesthetics. Camera shake from the handheld camera, disjointed cuts, and silences in the audio give *ABG* the feel of a video your friend might have taken on their cell phone, spliced together, and sent to you. These editorial, compounded with J's god(dess)-like, narrative voice over, inspires a viewer-protagonist parasocial relationship, which is a more one-sided relationship between a media text and audience member wherein the viewer has more emotional investment in the media text than the producers of the text invests in the individual viewer. These elements place the audience in a position to identify with and feel as though they are getting an exclusive look into the life of Awkward Black Girl.

YouTube's unique platform features aspects bear mention, though my focus is on the rhetorical tactics used by Rae and others on the *ABG* production team. Existing on a platform like YouTube means that the clip an audience member watches is colored by all the surrounding texts in their field of vision. Much like the company you keep or the discourses happening in the room you sit while watching a movie influences your perception of the film, the hyperlinked videos, the videos extending along the side of the video, the rating features and view count, and the comments scrawling below the video all impact the interpretation of a YouTube clip. Focusing on the aspects under the control of Issa Rae Productions, multiple times throughout the course of the series boxes pop up in the screen. These boxes link the viewer to songs played within the episode, to other episodes referenced within the current one, and to a Kickstarter fundraiser used to keep *ABG* in production. I forward that not only do these boxes enact a sort of (self-)promotion for Issa Rae Productions and affiliated music or creative artists. These boxes also strengthen a parasocial relationship between viewer and producer. Much like a friend recommending a song, Issa Rae Productions embeds song links that were requested in the comments into the mise-en-scene of the video. Moreover, in season two, at the bottom right

corner of the frame, a lime green #ABG appeared throughout the duration of each episode. I posit these four characters, while again acting as a form of promotion for Issa Rae Productions (and later I am Other, the production team backing season two) Rae utilizes affordances of the Web in aim to build community across social media. By providing a hashtag for her audience, Rae enacts the Crunk feminist commandment of wielding technology; she galvanizes her viewers around a searchable, multi-platform text.

Issa Rae's ability to directly interact with her audience *while* they watch her program is a type of unruliness not afforded by television or cinema. It further emphasizes the impression that there is another *human* on the other side of the screen rather than a crew completely detached from the reality in which viewers exist. In this way, Rae wielded technology in order to envision the possibilities of *ABG*; she utilized the platform to create something where the community gathered around her felt as though they were being listened to and spoken to. Moreover, she created a space where she was able to continue funding her project, as expressed in the first chapter. Rae created a community around her text and created a text from her community.

Dreamscapes and Clapbacks: Rae's Textual Unruliness

As noted above, much of Rae's unruliness and Crunk feminist performance occurs within the text of *ABG* itself. Central to Rae's rhetoric of unruliness is understanding that it is tempered with awkwardness. In other words, Rae rarely directly performs unruliness in the scene that invoked her discontent. Rather, she performs unruliness just for the audience using dreamscapes, voice-overs, and flash forwards. Notable about the use of dreamscapes is that they "invariably signal the eruption of unconscious desire, and in this episode, the dream is linked with the

eruption of female desire, the defining mark of the unruly woman.”¹⁷² Rae’s implementation of dreamscapes signals her unruly desire *and* her simultaneous tightened jaw to her audience. Not saying something is saying something; by remaining quiet, J suggests at the struggle over the signification of Blackness and Black womanhood, noted in the introduction of this thesis. In fact, within the comments on an episode explicitly targeting passive aggressive behavior, one commenter wrote, “i think passive aggressiveness is a black thing, cuz we kinda just sit there and take it and then just let it brew later,” to which three others responded in agreement. J’s dreamscapes represent a cathartic release discussed in Chapter Two, which, as this commenter wrote, has long been brewing.

J’s workplace is one space rife with “revenge and revenge fantasies are sample of feminist imagination.”¹⁷³ Not particularly fond of her co-workers, J illustrates the full force of her unruliness in the series’ second episode. After explaining that her boyfriend was cheating on her so she broke up with him, moved out, and cut off all her hair, J takes aim at her work place. The audience is played into the episode with the quirky intro music and series logo. The screen goes black and J states, “my boss is a dumbfuck of an idiot.”¹⁷⁴ The scene cuts to a medium-shot, moderately low-angle shot of her boss, an eccentric, white, middle-aged woman. The frame then switches to an establishing shot of J and Boss Lady facing each other in conversation, sitting at her desk and Boss Lady standing over her. Within this five-second introduction to the episode, the viewers are rhetorically interpolated into J’s viewpoint. The camera angle and voice-over implore the viewers to empathize and even identify with Rae’s J.

The voiceover initiating the scene primes her boss as an offensive, ignorant woman and rhetorically positions J’s audience to empathize with her. The camera angles also engage the

¹⁷² Ibid., 88.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 89.

¹⁷⁴ Issa Rae, *The Job, The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* (YouTube2011), 0:05-0:07.

audience rhetorically. The low-angle shot combined with the establishing shot implies that the viewer's first interaction with Boss Lady is taking place through J's perspective. It hails audience members as an active participant in this interaction and shot encourages the audience member to empathize with J. Moreover, by placing the boss at slightly higher angle, this shot sets up an inherent power dynamic, which further explains J's perceived inability to respond to her boss's monologue:

Oh my god, your *hair*! [cut] I go out of town for one month, and I come back and it's like (*shrug*) [cut] Did it shrink? [cut] Did you wash it? [cut] (*shocked and covers mouth*) Can you wash it? [cut] Girlfriend, how are we gonna go get cornrows now? [cut] Why did you change it? [cut] Oh! (*hits self in the forehead*) It's Black History Month. [cut] Is that how your ancestors wore it? [cut] What about your boyfriend? [cut] Does he like it? [cut] (*gasp*) [cut] He **dumped** you?! [cut] Could you hook us up? [cut] I'm just kidding.¹⁷⁵

Throughout this "running of mouth," the Boss Lady's exuberant attitude and the swift, disjointed cuts from one frame to the next suggests that this woman is not malicious, she is ignorant. And, per the agreeing comments that run below the YouTube video, this is not a standalone experience, but rather one that many Black women have had. In fact, one commenter noted, "That hair scene is why I'm apprehensive about changing my hair. Every time I style it different there is a reaction." By placing the storyline from the perspective of J, Rae created a story that specifically Black women can identify with and communicate about in a digital community. Moreover, the scene concludes with the Boss Lady reaching out to touch J's hair and "real-life" J shouting "No!" and hitting her boss's hand out of her personal space. In the comments on the episode, viewers shared their irritation at times when strangers randomly will touch their hair

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 0:07-0:30.

(“Strangers touching my hair enrages me... I am not your pet”) and ask them questions about their hair (“People are just so clueless and curious about black people that they just don't understand that they come off as being fucking ANNOYING”). Rae created a space where the Black women could come and empathize with this shared experience while also influencing who do not share these experiences to see these interactions from a perspective that is not their own. In this creation, Rae and the commenters quoted above both enact rhetoric of unruliness. Rae and commenters wield technology to be seen, heard, and understood. Further, echoing the findings of Chapter Two, users relate to this unruly text and galvanize around it in order to share their experiences of marginalization and foster their collective catharsis.

By turning the tables and shining a light on the dominant hegemonic understanding produced as a result of discourse from white publics, Rae is able to, through satire, “safely” chastise white folks who participate in this form of implicit racism and othering. However, Rae does not stop at just mild shaming of white ignorance. This scene continues with J expressing that she would love to respond by yelling, “Shut up! Shhhh! SHUT UPPP. Seriously, what’s wrong with you? What the fuck is wrong with you?”¹⁷⁶ at Boss Lady. By outwardly expressing her irritation through dreamscape, J both talks back and turns it out, rhetorical tactics of bringing wreck via a combination of Crunk Feminism and unruliness. She talks back by expressing her irritation thereby destabilizing the power structure of employer/employee and matching the “inappropriateness” of her boss’s comments. As Pough notes, talking back is a healing gesture as it reorients the actor from object of criticism the subject with a liberated voice. Moreover, she turns it out in the simple act of calling attention to the absurdity of her boss’s expression. In using satire, Rae’s unruliness operates as an enactment of critical public pedagogy on Black feminist thought. She performs the experience through her eyes and thereby shifts the

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 0:30-0:40.

perspectival paradigm, resulting in new insight and understanding on Awkward Black Girl's world.

The discussion around the touching and asking about Black women's hair in the comments below the video seemed to be a rather robust one.¹⁷⁷ The comments also illustrated that people who could not identify with J's experience expressed their confusion, admittance of fault ("i won't lie i'm guilty of doing that [questioning about hair] myself too, smh"), disagreement ("@chichidark are you kidding? She's just an offensive dumb fuck, seems to me no one should be offended if you ask them about their hair"), and feelings of offense at J's call out. In this way, Rae opened a political charged and often not discussed topic relating to everyday experiences of Black women in a public arena. Though she cannot guarantee that the conversation will be productive, nonetheless, Rae *wielded* her access to *technology* to perform this galvanization.

As this episode goes on, we also learn of one of J's coping strategies: writing raps. As a clear enactment of a rhetoric of unruliness, J provides us insight into her passive aggressive relationship with a domineering, micromanaging coworker, Nina. Nina is not only the series' antagonist, but also she is superior to J in the company, getting the promotion that they were competing against each other for, and, for some time, she dated J's crush. After the scene where Nina humbly brags her way through an apology to J about receiving the promotion, the episode cuts to J rapping about Nina being a "stupid light-skinned bitch" with a "vagina [that] smells like fish, fish, fish. No lesbo."¹⁷⁸ The scene then cuts back to J and Nina as J fumbles together a response to slough off Nina's assumption that J is upset about not getting the promotion. In her

¹⁷⁷ For reference on political and historical significance of Black women's hair, see: Althea Prince. *The Politics of Black Women's Hair*. London, Ont: Insomniac Press, 2009.

¹⁷⁸ *The Job*, 2:28-2:35.

rap, J alludes to colorism and homophobia within African American communities and conceptions of light- and dark-skinned women of color in media representations.

Nina's character not only acts as the antagonist, but her relationship with J is also metonymic of the relations between light-skinned and dark-skinned African Americans, as J alludes to in her rap. In the U.S. imaginary, light-skinned women have been perceived as more attractive, more intelligent, and able to code switch into "mainstream" discourse more easily than dark-skinned women. This tropic construction is historically grounded slave-era in essentialism and white supremacy (which is satirized in a joke about "house slaves" and "field slaves" in season two, episode four); it's rooted in the belief that if one's skin is lighter they are mixed race and therefore superior due to their white ancestry. Moreover, "historically, African Americans with lighter skin have contributed to colorism because they have benefited from the privilege of having a skin color closer to that of Whites and have embraced the notion that privilege comes with having light skin in America."¹⁷⁹ The contemporary conversation tends to center on the privileges afforded: "Mainstream advertising sustains subtle self-differentiation based on color preferences ... lighter complexioned or biracial African Americans appear to gain more access to the social, political, and economic institutions of America than darker skinned blacks."¹⁸⁰ The comments under the video illustrate the contemporary, interpersonal tensions that exist among light and dark skin women. "Nina's the reason why I hate lightskin women," "i hate dat light skin bitch," "TEAM DARKSKIN eff Nina" and "i hate lightskin bitches like nina" are just a few comments that illustrate the tensions existing between light skin women and dark skin women. The ideology around light and dark complexion holds residual effects of the colorline, but has

¹⁷⁹ Mary to Racism Review, 2011, <http://www.racismreview.com/blog/2011/03/26/african-americans-still-victims-of-colorism/>.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

shifted to how focus more on the divisive constructions of how Black women construct themselves and perceive each other.

Rae uses awkwardness as a catalyst to engage ambivalent politics. Her critique is colored with her own homophobic sentiment. J concludes her rap with “No lesbo,” a shorthand way of saying she does not intend for her rap to suggest any queer sexual tendencies. Below in the comments, one viewer posted “This is cool. I would like the homophobia to be left out.” This kind of comment occurred occasionally throughout the series whenever a homophobic sentiment appeared in the episode. Tied to historical constructions of Blackness, silencing of queerness in Hip-Hop and Black cultures roots itself in the constraints of respectability politics vis-à-vis heterosexism, transphobia, and misogyny as intercultural disciplining functions.¹⁸¹ In other words, because of the strong, cultural ties to the Church along with the association between queerness and deviousness, Black cultures have been perceived as outspokenly anti-queer. I posit here that, therefore, queer people of color are sensitive to shows of homophobic sentiment.

J’s rap shows ambivalence on the level of systemic oppression to interpersonal interpretation, but also through the polysemic nature of satire. To be clear, the common phrase “no homo” is often heard as a way to deny any queer implications from men. It appeared and was popularized in the 90’s song “Silky (No Homo)” by Harlem rapper, Cam’ron.¹⁸² Since then it has appeared in rap songs by Kanye West, Lil Wayne, and Chamillionaire, with several others using other phrasing to make their heterosexuality know – loud and clear. However, the phrase “no lesbo” appears much more infrequently. I do not mean to imply a lack of anti-LGBTQ articulation from or toward women in Hip-Hop. I simply intend to point out that Rae’s intention

¹⁸¹ Crunk Feminist Collective, *The Crunk Feminist Collection* ed. Susana Morris Brittney Cooper and Robin Boylorn (The Feminist Press, 2017).

¹⁸² Jonah Weiner, "The Rise of No Homo and the Changing Face of Hip-Hop Homophobia," Slate, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music_box/2009/08/does_this_purple_mink_make_me_look_gay.html.

in her use of the phrase could have been to actually point out how absurdly “no homo” is used in rap lyrics. Satire is an inherently ambiguous tool. Without the proper context, a joke is, for better or for worse, left ambivalently open.

Wielding Awkwardness

While there are clear moments where Rae’s writing takes a stand, and other moments wherein she remains ambivalent, Rae wields awkwardness to unveil disconnect between expectations and reality and then follows the awkwardness with a show of unruliness to clarify the intent. For example, when provided insight through dreamscapes or voiceovers, J’s “awkward” moments with Nina and Boss Lady act as cultural criticism, public pedagogy, and Crunk Feminism. Rae’s J enacts cultural criticism through self-definition and the exposure of her experience through her own eyes thereby constituting her oppressors as absurd. And finally, she performs critical public pedagogy through the insight her satirical performances provide. She highlights her personal feelings on moments that she has felt her voice stifled for numerous, intersecting, historically founded conceptions of identity, race, power, and privilege. The simple act of calling them out in a cut away is an act of defiance, and a show of self-value.

J’s awkward interaction and response to Nina’s manipulation is a site of J’s cognitive dissonance between knowing her worth and not knowing how to express it in an environment that repeatedly works to marginalize and oppress her. In this case, awkwardness works as a teaching tool to expose the psychological suppression of the “Angry Black Woman.” In other words, Rae exposes that J and other women of color have not been provided a social script for how to publicly express their anger without fear of being disregarded as irrational or a pot-stirrer.

Awkwardness is also used to examine everyday interactions without any tangible hierarchical power differentials. I posit that these interactions demonstrate what Rae noted in her

interview with Larry King; myriad communities and audience can relate to and enjoy awkward humor and cringe comedy – it is not simply a white phenomenon. Rae deploys seemingly apolitical use of awkward humor most prevalently in an episode in which she meets her partner's friends for the first time. In season two episode eight of *ABG*, J goes out to a party to meet her partner's three closest friends.¹⁸³ Unfortunately, her partner ends up being the only person at the party that she knows and she resolves to seek out a group to connect with while he is preoccupied. Not only is J trying to blend into the party, but also she is additionally seeking the approval of her partner's friends. As the scene unfolds, the viewers follow an uncharismatic J desperately trying to be perceived as a cool girlfriend able to mingle with the best of them, while continuously being rejected from her attempts to blend into one clique, *any* clique. The experience of seeking approval in a room full of strangers and/or from the friends of one's partner is an experience with which most people can identify.

Additionally, this episode was the most commented on in reference to its awkwardness; specifically, 2.51 percent of the comments make reference to the audience's own second-hand experience of or relation to awkwardness while watching the video. Additionally, this episode was most commented on with references to awkwardness. The uncomfortable interactions Rae writes about seem, on their surface, to be apolitical, they actually enact an important political role in the struggle over the signification of Black womanhood. They provide an image of a Black woman who is not sassy, angry, overly sexual(ized), asexual, suffering, or pointedly strong. This use of awkwardness, then, *is* political.

¹⁸³ Issa Rae, *The Friends, Awkward Black Girl* (YouTube2011).

Awkwardness, Education, and Cultural Difference

Rae also mobilizes awkwardness to show discontinuities in cultural understandings from multiple angles. She explicitly does this in reference to her interactions with her love interest, White Jay. As his name suggests, he is “Cute J’s” white partner. We are introduced to him in season one, episode five of *ABG*. Throughout the entire show, J and White Jay address issues of interracial dating and the dynamics that take place both in their relationship and in society. In episode seven, J and Jay go on their first date. After receiving advice from her best friend Cece that white guys like casual girls, J met up with Jay dressed in an outfit that she “wears to the gym sometimes.”¹⁸⁴ In short, the date consisted of Jay bringing J to a restaurant that serves exclusively fried chicken followed by a performance of spoken word poetry. Spoken word and fried chicken both have stereotypical associations with Black culture. After each of J’s realizations about Jay’s plans for the evening, a brief moment of exasperation crosses her face. Collins forwards that these subtler expressions of discontent are commonplace, learned practices of Black women. Because Black women have had to remain silent in order to avoid oppressive sanction, they have developed other, subtler ways of expressing resistance.¹⁸⁵ In doing this, J was utilizing non-verbal talking back by engaging with African America women’s communicative tradition of looking.

Moreover, here I suggest that J utilizes awkwardness as an extension, less subtle, Crunk feminist form of looking. Upon arriving to the theater, and informing J that they would not be attending stand-up of one of her favorite comedians, Jay also expresses his confusion and misunderstanding when announcing to J that they will be going to spoken word. After receiving disapproval from J, Jay’s body language deflates with his confidence. His performance indicates

¹⁸⁴ Issa Rae, *The Date, Awkward Black Girl* (YouTube 2011), 3:08.

¹⁸⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Rev. 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

that he truly believed he was crafting a comfortable evening for J to enjoy based on what he knows about Black women and Black culture – knowledge based on stereotypes, that is.

As the date continues, J does not remain completely silent in her discontent. She physically expresses her discomfort while providing insight (bringing wreck) through her narrative voiceover. The spoken word performance begins with a woman expressing how she should live today as if it were tomorrow, yet being unable to because



she is depressed. Three seconds into her performance, the shot switches to an earnest, intrigued, and misplaced Jay seated next to a bored, and irritated J (see photo). J's voiceover announces, "Rap and poetry had baby named Spoken Word. I wish I could abort that baby."¹⁸⁶ Immediately after this thought, she turns to look at Jay who is nodding along, in clear attempt not to offend or disrespect something he associates with J's culture. Moments later J orders a shot and the woman on stage calls out Jay saying: "I see you white chocolate. I'll give you what you need; I'll be the coffee to your cream. I know sista-girl [in reference to J], I feel you. It's rough out here."¹⁸⁷ Jay immediately shrinks down into his chair next to a frustrated and embarrassed J. In this interaction, the spoken word artist was referring to two stereotypes associated with white man/Black woman heterosexual relationships. First, the artist assumes that the relationship is based on fetishistic desires of white men for Black women. By cheekily saying, "I can give you what you need, I'll be the coffee to your cream" the performer narrates Jay and J's relationship

¹⁸⁶ Rae, *The Date*, 7:48-7:53.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 8:20-8:27.

through a stereotyped lens, implying that the only reason a Black woman might be desirable to a white man is because of ideological associations of Black womanhood and hyper-sexuality.

Second, the performer “empathizes” with J over the perceived inability for a Black woman to find a “decent” Black man to be with, therefore choosing to date white men. The commentary below this video was complete with twenty-five comments explicitly discussing interracial relationships and twenty-seven comments referencing the respective characteristics of white and Black men as romantic partners. The comments regarding interracial couples consisted of anecdotes of people’s own experiences of being in an interracial couple or the perception thereof (“Imfao! this episode is so real life for an initial interracial dating!!”/”Black girl doing spoken word was on point about the perception of interracial relationships.”), references to reactions to J and White Jay’s relationship (“The look on the black guy face that's on his own Interracial Date is priceless Ironic”), and general comments on the topic of interracial dating (“its funny how interracial dating is still an issue in the States of all places”). The comments comparing Black men and white men as romantic partners generally consisted of references to the scenes in the episodes (“Did he really say \ I thought you were my boy Reggie\”? Typical ignorant ass black man”), anecdote of people’s own experiences dating Black or white men (“i’ve dated white men...i actually prefer them. Jay is soooo my type #Hecangetit lol”/ “People act like i should not have opinions on the black experience just cus I date white guys (not exclusively). More white men are interested in me than black where i live and I’m not about to start chasing someguys who don’t want me.”), and general expressions on the status of Black and/or white men (“Black guys hate seeing black girls with white men. Same with black women hating black men with white women. its annoying.”).

This quagmire of a date centered itself on stereotypes of Black women and white men. During the third spoken word recital of the night, as a woman took the stage and performed a piece about how terrible white men are, how Black women who date white men are race traitors, and about the sexual inadequacies of white men in comparison to Black men – similar sentiments were expressed in comments. J had reached her limit and abruptly left the theater. Once outside, J confronted Jay about his choices for their date night:

J: What the fuck were you thinking? Really? Fried chicken and spoken word?

Jay: Me? [stammers] What were *you* thinking? I mean come on! You weren't even trying. (**Gestures to her outfit**) I mean come on! What are you wearing?

[laughter]¹⁸⁸

In this scene, Rae writes in her Crunk feminist politics through knowing the history founding these stereotypes, and then educating on the absurdity of discourses founded in stereotypes. J comes to the realization that she had made the same mistake as Jay in her attempt to perform “appropriate” whiteness. The shift from purely presenting awkward situations, to using each awkward situation as validation for unruliness, J shifts the interpretation of the episode from being “autobiographical,” consisting of perspectival explanation, to autoethnographic, consisting of critical public pedagogy. Rae’s production of this episode reveals that both J and Jay made decisions for the night based on stereotypes of the other’s perceived cultural preferences. By acknowledging the root of their disagreements in shared practiced of stereotyping, Jay and J catalyze their awkwardness and use it as a teaching tool for how cultural stereotypes are too heavily relied upon, which diminished the existence depth of the human beneath the stereotype.

In exposing her own foibles, J shows how she can be complicit in her engagement with stereotypes, again embracing an ambivalence, a Crunk feminist practice. By owning her mistakes

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 10:40-11:10.

in a satirical setting, Rae constructed a space where viewers are able to reflect on the metaphorical sausage of interracial relationships being made. Moreover, because viewers are implored to empathize with J, Rae rhetorically encourages this reflection as a form of Black feminist praxis. Also, as mentioned, this is a Crunk feminist practice. Rae enacted a feminism that can fuck with the grays by acknowledging the gray areas of relationships, power structures, and discrimination that shape intercultural discourse and interpersonal communication broadly.

Conclusion

Rae's deployment of awkwardness in the form of charged humor has many rhetorical implications. The first implication of using awkwardness as a satirical tactic is that it pointedly acts as a comedic questioning of "the assumed." Rae's strategic use of awkwardness confronts historical and contemporary assumptions of racial, gendered, and sexual identity. By stepping into the role of Awkward Black Girl, Rae calls attention to stereotypes, which she and many other Black women do not comfortably reside. Moreover, through awkwardness, Rae indirectly confronts the viewers who might assume hold prejudice on controlling images of Blackness, womanhood, interracial couples, and varying other cultural markers of difference. By making awkward the assumed, Rae denaturalizes her viewers' prejudiced or stereotyped understandings. The second implication is that through the process of denaturalization, Rae plays with that which is "taken for granted," and displays common sense ideology as something to be questioned. In utilizing charged humor, Rae opens up space for the expression of alternative hegemonies. These alternative hegemonies further the production of cultural citizenship and craft interpretive communities. My next chapter explicitly addresses the discourses that take place within these interpretive communities and how cultural citizenship is fostered an enacted.

In Conclusion, Stay Weird

Throughout this project, I have observed the work of awkwardness and the rhetoric of unruliness, and how audiences respond to them. I asked the questions, how can women and feminists, particularly women of color, use online spaces to be seen and heard intra-, cross-, and transculturally? What strategies does Rae use, that might be available to others, to transform and mobilize an emancipatory version of unruliness? In my examination of *ABG* and the discourses that surround it, I argue:

1. Rae's awkwardness enacts a satirical subversion that jettisons shallow representations and controlling images of Black womanhood.
2. YouTube provided a compatible platform, on which myriad, ambivalent representations and hegemonies can be seen and heard. Around these representations, interpretive communities form, cultural citizenship is forged, and Crunk feminist politics are enacted and perpetuated.

This thesis does not seek to bolster awkwardness as a cure-all or an ideal form of satire, nor to I claim to be the first person to theorize about awkward humor or cringe comedy. However, I do forward here that satirized awkwardness can play a crucial role in the education on dominant ideology. Awkwardness can be catalyzed to unveil inconsistencies, prejudices, and stereotypes.

Comedians have long utilized awkward humor and cringe comedy in order to shine a light on the messiness and absurdity of communication, stereotypes, and decorum. However, in this thesis I explored how awkwardness is uniquely positioned to confront controlling images, much like Karlyn's unruly woman. However, instead of subverting expectations through opposition, awkwardness ambivalently enacts a refusal of expectations. I observe this through Rae's navigation of historical and contemporary landscape of controlling images applied to

Black women. I reviewed the rhetorical functioning of satire and how subversive satire is easily confounded in regard to Black women and the matrix of controlling images they are met with in the U.S. imaginary. I presented Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's work of the unruly woman, and addressed the complications this strategy faces when donned by non-White women. Therefore, as an alternative, I presented the rhetoric of unruliness as an intersectional alternative to moments of satirical subversion. In addition, I theorized awkwardness as cathartic and galvanizing tool that marries the rhetoric of unruliness and Crunk Feminism.

Important to understand here is awkwardness as a satirical catalyst. Viewing awkwardness through an earnest lens can inspire a sense of mortification in an actor or an audience member. However, catalyzing awkwardness through satire sends social convention, ideas, and beliefs into the realm of play. In *ABG*, Issa Rae not only created an amusing YouTube series, but she utilized a satirical technique to confront stereotypes and controlling images of Black womanhood. Rae enacted Crunk Feminism by centering herself and using the rhetoric of unruliness to show the absurdities of certain prejudices and controlling images. In doing so, Rae crafted a community around her work.

Chapter Review

"Emb(Rae)cing Awkward" consisted of two analysis chapters. The expression of counter-hegemonic visions takes place in the comment section below each episode. In my second chapter, *(Don't) Read the Comments*, I perform a content analysis on 1,150 YouTube comments from *ABG*'s twenty-three webisodes. This chapter centers on the creation and shaping of interpretive communities and cultural citizenship, and the Crunk feminist praxis grounding one's research in community. I found that users were much more likely to express positive, rather than negative, feelings, opinions, and expressions of identification to *ABG*. I further argue that by

commenting, users shape the way *ABG* is interpreted, they testify to the experiences of Rae's J, and further carve out a space for themselves to belong. Users react with a Crunk feminist praxis in the comments that reflected the Crunk feminist praxis Rae performs in the episodes. In short, users congregate around the characteristic of awkwardness and in response to Rae's enactments of the rhetoric of unruliness, they respond with their own rhetoric of unruliness.

In the third chapter, *(Mis-)Adventuring, Awkwardness, and Ambivalence*, I perform rhetorical critique of *ABG*. In this chapter, I review how Rae enacted Crunk Feminism and how YouTube aided her ability to broadcast and publish her work. I examine *ABG*'s contextual and editorial aspects with regard to awkwardness and unruliness. In this process, I show how Rae enacts a Crunk feminist praxis by performing knowledge of history and wielding technology. I explore Rae's interrogation of stereotypes and her embrace of ambivalence in the content of specific *ABG* clips. Finally, I examine how she enacts awkward as a rhetoric of unruliness through voiceovers, dreamscapes, and scene cuts. This narrative construction simultaneously embraces ambivalence (via awkwardness) at times and positions Rae in explicit opposition (via unruliness or wreck) to discrimination at other times.

My goal in *(Mis-)Adventuring, Awkwardness, and Ambivalence* was to unearth how Rae's use of awkwardness performs satirical subversion. I discovered that Rae's use of awkwardness and the construction of scenes speaks to myriad audiences of different demographic backgrounds and often complicates and navigates, rather than subverts, controlling images. Through satire, Rae constructs narratives wherein J experiences and responds to implicit racism and othering from white folks. The utilization of satire in J's scenes "scolds" enactments of implicit racism. Rae's scolding unruliness enacts critical public pedagogy of Black feminist thought. By performing the clip through J's experience, Rae shifts the perspectival paradigm

from one that has traditionally been of a white, male, hetero gaze to her own awkward, Black woman's perspective. The result of this shift is new insight and understanding on Awkward Black Girl's world. Her acts of defiance in the face of power structures is a form of Black feminist praxis wherein Rae enacts self-valuation and projects her own voice.

Ambiguity is central to awkwardness because the act of "being awkward" is catalyzed by the ambiguous nature of ideology. By performing awkwardness, Rae denaturalizes that which is "taken for granted." By deploying charged humor, Rae performs critical public pedagogy and opens up space for the expression of counter-hegemonies. Rae ambivalently addresses issues of homophobia within communities of color. This enactment of awkwardness represents how the polysemic nature of satire can be detrimental when the joke is left ambiguous. Ambivalent satire and polysemy manifests in the comment section below the video. In the chapter, *(Don't) Read the Comments*, I hint at an interplay of ambivalent content within *ABG* and how it produces an ambivalent comment section. The expression of politically questionable jokes within the content of an episode is excellent fodder for the discussion of this content in comments. However, similarly, Rae's enactments of the rhetoric of unruliness also yields commenters' expressions of rhetorics of unruliness. Nonetheless YouTube is uniquely positioned in to be shaped by its users in this symbiotic way. As I stated in Chapter Two, the content surrounding the video pane shapes the video itself. Therefore, political discussions on, for example, homophobic jokes become part of the viewer's interpretive experience. They are not viewing the video on a television and then clicking over to Twitter to look at the conversation their peers are having. Rather, the conversation of their peers is happening just below the video and is therefore inextricably attached to it.

My examination of both *ABG*'s episode content and by performing a quantitative content analysis of the comments below made clear two things. First, awkwardness is a powerfully galvanizing rhetorical tool. Though my sample size was admittedly a mere fraction of the total comments, the ability for myriad voices to converge and testify to both their experiences of awkwardness and the on screen representation of J's awkwardness exemplifies the importance Rae's representation made. Rae created *ABG* as a response to the threat of symbolic annihilation. George Gerbner and Larry Gross explain, "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation."¹⁸⁹ As a result of the felt absence, Rae's work at least partially mollifies this threat for viewers who did not see their likeness accurately represented on screens.

Second, YouTube has become an increasingly central space for the struggle over signification. Not only are people like Rae creating unique and myriad representations in response to mass-mediated representations, but also the audience (commenters) now play a central role in the struggle over signification. Not only will users comment on their displeasure of discourses within the episodes (e.g. the discussions of homophobia mentioned in Chapter Two), but user support also give weight to young creators, like Rae, who prior to landing a deal with HBO had pitched her ideas to television industry executives who told her "there was no audience for the kind of work we we're trying to do [sic]."¹⁹⁰ As mentioned before, YouTube comments act as an archive – an archive and evidence. Young, Black, female creatives, who have long been denied seats in the writers' room, are now able to quantifiably prove their voices have an audience. Albeit the fact that Rae and other marginalized voices have to go to such

¹⁸⁹ George Gerbner and Larry Gross. "Living with Television: The Violence Profile." *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 2 (1976): 182.

¹⁹⁰ Arianna Schioldager. "Issa Rae on Failure, the Old Hollywood Boys Club & Throwing Chairs." CreateCultivate.com.

lengths is nonetheless a manifestation of a much larger, systemic issue, YouTube provides a space to tip the creative balances.

Asking Questions and Finding Answers

I began this thesis asking how women and feminists, particularly women of color, can use online spaces to be seen and heard intra-, cross-, and transculturally. In the process of writing this thesis, I have discovered that one answer to this question lies in YouTube's call to "Broadcast Yourself." As I noted in my introductory chapter, pop culture plays a prominent role in the creation of counter-hegemony and the crafting of ideology. YouTube's call to "Broadcast Yourself" shifts the culture around who defines and who is defined by mass media. Issa Rae defines how she wants to be represented and how she wants her voice to be heard in her creation of *ABG*. She navigates the constraints put on her voice and representation *through* YouTube. Audiences congregate around her videos to respond to her use of this online space, in turn also using this online space to project their voice into the larger public sphere.

I also began this thesis asking what strategies Rae used to transform and mobilize an emancipatory unruliness and if that technique is available to others. Through my two chapters I have shown how awkwardness, satire, and the use of YouTube as a platform all aided Rae in crafting her emancipatory unruliness. Moreover, through my quantitative analysis in combination with my rhetorical analysis, I observe that viewers more often than not respond to a rhetoric of unruliness with an echoed rhetoric of unruliness. While awkwardness is just one technique of resignification, I have argued that more broadly satire and play open a space for a continued conversation over representation. Moreover, YouTube provides a platform both where Rae was able to perform her playful unruliness and users were able to converse about it. She provided an

example of how to broadcast oneself and further how one is able to wield technology in order to break into an industry that repeatedly works to shut them out.

Representation Matters: Implications and Future Research

While representation may seem on its face inconsequential in relation to broader issues within the public sphere, it is a prominent catalyst for external discourses. I am not the first to suggest this, however for emphasis here let me paraphrase scholars who have come before me: media shape our understanding of the world around us and those creating and producing media texts have a great ability to craft the public imaginary. Representation is a powerful rhetorical tool; its implications are carried into interpersonal interaction – into issues of justice and inequality. If Black women are repeatedly portrayed as stereotypes, these stereotypes become real within a viewer’s interpretation. Although watching media is “just” a form of entertainment, that entertainment is also a lived experience for the viewer. If a Black woman is repeatedly stereotyped and shut out of a writer’s room, others repeatedly determine her public image.

However, YouTube is a space where this gap between “creators” and “consumers” is complicated. YouTube, though it holds its own structural constraints, is a space of producers, editors, testifiers, and viewers. It is a space where people collaboratively craft images and their interpretations. YouTube provides opportunities for young creatives to redefine representations and prove themselves. It is a space where amateurs can be “discovered” and get paid for their craft. Viewers can find validation and confidence in their identity through the cultural citizenship YouTube fosters.

In this project, I aimed to marry rhetorical studies and audience studies via quantitative analysis to further understand *ABG*. The intersection of rhetoric and audience is one rife with possibilities for future research. Rhetorical studies, specifically in reference to the study of

personas, gains insight from reception studies by combining rhetoric's predisposed attention to the nuance of the text (platform, message, speaker, and various audiences) with reception studies' keenness how each aspect of the text creates another. Further, rhetorical studies benefits from reception studies' focus on the effect rather than the factors that create the effect. The result of which permits rhetorical scholars to analyze a message through its lifespan utilizing various methodologies. Likewise, audience analysis can benefit from understanding more thoroughly the rhetorical tactics of each text that audiences respond to. Reception studies can benefit from rhetorical studies' focus on a macro-level view of discourse, while analyzing the manifestation of this discourse in audience interaction.

This project is only the beginning of a longer journey to discover how representation and (re-)signification move across media. Media are, as Jonathan Gray notes, inherently intertextual. They borrow from other texts and, in the age of social media sites, produce a cornucopia of texts from audiences from various positionalities. However, I have not studied the text in its entirety. Texts are circulated and speak on different mediums for different purposes. They are re-articulated through distribution and through setting. Therefore, as our world becomes increasingly digitized and media become intertextually shared and produced, transmedia studies will indeed become salient to both reception studies and rhetorical studies.

One Last Note...

Awkwardness is important. Discomfort is important. These experiences unveil hiccups in social order. Awkward interactions are snags in the social fabric, which, upon further wear and tear, can unveil power structures and false ideology. They should not simply be brushed off as blunders and moved past as if nothing were wrong. A society without awkwardness implies either a dystopia or a utopia, both of which exist only in the realm of the imaginary. Therefore, a

life perceived to be without awkwardness is one that is deluded or privileged to not believe that the actor had a hand in crafting the awkward experience. A life without awkwardness is a life without certain challenges and slippages needed for social progress.

I blush. I *cringe*. I learn. My education on race, media, and representation did not come until the fall of my senior year as an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota. My then professor, Stephen Bennett, assigned the class a short paper; we were to read bell hooks, Stuart Hall, and M. Elizabeth Blair and then listen to Kanye West's album *Yeezus* and analyze the lyrics. Challenged by my lack of vocabulary and the immense awkwardness I felt writing about race and representation in the U.S., I spent five hours writing a two-page paper on West's lyrics. Since then, I have created many awkward experiences by saying the wrong thing, misunderstanding someone else, and relying too heavily on stereotypes or preconceived notions. I do not tell this story as a self-congratulatory, "look at that white person try" anecdote. Rather, I write it to explain how my own experience of awkwardness has proven incredibly productive. It has taught me about my own standings, beliefs, and discomfort. It has taught me to where to look to unpack and deconstruct my prejudices.

Awkwardness has the power to demystify the obfuscated workings of social convention. Turning away from awkward or uncomfortable experiences is irresponsible both in and outside of the academy. As scholars of communication, it is our duty to lean into our discomfort, learn, and grow. In this process, we can work to push the needle further from the dystopian image of a world where expressions of awkwardness as micro-dissent is unpermitted and closer to that utopic image of a world where awkwardness is not needed.

In short, keep learning, keep fighting, and stay weird.

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Vita

Kiah E. Bennett was born (1992) and raised in Waseca, MN. After graduating from Waseca High School in 2010, she went on to study at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, MN, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies, emphasis in Media Studies and Rhetorical Studies, and a minor in German. In May 2018, she received her M.A. in Communication and Rhetorical Studies from Syracuse University. In addition, she received a Certificate of Advanced Study in the Department of Women and Gender Studies with recognition for this thesis project. In the Fall of 2018, Kiah E. Bennett will pursue her Ph.D. in the Department of Communication at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado.