



The (Im)Poster Child: Understanding Black Collegiate Women's Identity Development at HBCUs and PWIs through Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture is a powerful site through which Black collegiate women interpret race, gender, and institutional belonging, yet higher education scholarship rarely treats visual media as a serious analytic resource. This essay analyzes two contemporary television series, *All American: Homecoming* (Carroll et al., 2022–2024) and *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018–2024), as cultural texts that illuminate the racialized and gendered identity development of Black women at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Drawing on Patterson's (2016) progression to womanhood framework, Clance and Imes' (1978) imposter phenomenon, and Black feminist media scholarship, we show how institutional context shapes the protective resources Black collegiate women can access, and how popular culture both reflects and complicates those structures. We close with theoretical, policy, and practice implications that move beyond individualized accounts of self-doubt toward structural and culturally affirming responses.

Keywords: *Black Collegiate Women; Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Popular Culture; Imposter Phenomenon; Identity Development*

INTRODUCTION

Race, gender, and institutional culture intersect in distinctive ways for Black women in the United States higher education system. These entanglements take different shapes within historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) than within predominantly White institutions (PWIs). HBCUs and PWIs both enroll Black women, but the cultural ecologies they sustain differ substantially, and these ecologies materially shape how Black women come to see themselves as students, scholars, and emerging leaders (Cooper et al., 2017; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018). Within these distinct institutional environments, the affirmation or challenge of Black women's identities shapes how they navigate their sense of belonging, competence, and self-definition (Sharpe & Swinton, 2012; Showunmi, 2023). Black

women's self-definition involves embracing empowerment, positioning them as creators of knowledge with the power to share that knowledge and their wisdom (Lee-Johnson et al., 2025). Self-definition itself constitutes a Black feminist project. Collins (2022) characterized it as a refusal to let others dictate the contours of one's interior life, and Lee-Johnson et al. (2025) advanced that claim by positioning Black collegiate women as creators of knowledge whose lived insights matter for theory. Media depictions of Black identity development and of HBCU and PWI spaces convey such stories to broad audiences (Parrott-Scheffer, 2008).

In this theoretical essay, we examine two contemporary scripted dramas as theoretical interlocutors. *All American: Homecoming* (Carroll et al., 2022–2024) takes place at the fictional HBCU Brington University, while *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018–2024) unfolds at the fictional California University of Liberal Arts (Cal U), a PWI. Viewing these television series through Patterson's (2016) progression to womanhood framework and Clance and Imes' (1978) imposter phenomenon, we analyze how each show's depicted institutional climate produces divergent identity-development trajectories and divergent vulnerabilities to self-doubt. Our argument unfolds along three lines. First, we treat institutional context as a constitutive variable in Black women's identity development. Second, we cast popular culture as a Black feminist counter-narrative that supplements empirical scholarship by illuminating the affective textures of racialized gendered experience. Third, we recast the imposter phenomenon as a symptom of exclusionary institutional cultures rather than a private psychological failing (McGee et al., 2022; Tulshyan & Burey, 2021).

Grounding the analysis in HBCU and PWI contexts reflects a deliberate choice. As later sections elaborate, PWIs have long dominated scholarship on Black collegiate women, and that dominance has yielded a body of theory defining Black womanhood largely through its encounter with whiteness (Haynes et al., 2020; Patton, 2016). HBCUs offer an alternative site where the racial-cultural environment affirms Black students, even as gender, class, and respectability politics continue to shape student life (Mobley, 2017; Njoku & Patton, 2017). Placing both contexts side by side, with popular culture as a shared medium, we theorize the institutional conditions under which Black collegiate women best position themselves to move from imposed to authored selves.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature review that follows situates this analysis within three interrelated bodies of scholarship that inform our reading of Black collegiate women's identity development through popular culture. We first examine Black feminist media scholarship, which establishes popular culture as a serious analytic site and provides the interpretive tools for reading televised representations of Black women. We then turn to research on Black women's experiences within HBCU and PWI contexts, attending to the institutional cultures, mentorship structures, and protective resources that shape identity development across these settings. Finally, we review the theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis, namely Patterson's (2016) progression to womanhood and Clance and Imes' (1978) imposter phenomenon, alongside the Black feminist extensions.

Black Women in Popular Culture: A Critical Analytic Lens

Popular culture occupies no incidental presence in the lives of Black collegiate women. It supplies a primary domain in which they encounter scripts about Black womanhood, weigh those scripts against their own lives, and rehearse alternative possibilities. Black feminist media scholarship treats this engagement as analytically serious, and we follow that tradition. bell hooks (1992) maintained that Black women, historically denied the right to gaze, develop an oppositional gaze: a critical interrogation of representation that constitutes a political and intellectual practice. Working in this lineage, Boylorn

(2008) employed autoethnography to illustrate how Black women scholars and students bring multiple consciousness to bear on the televisual images that surround them, reading those images against personal and communal knowledge. However, recent scholarship cautions that increased visibility does not necessarily translate into substantive representation. For example, Warner (2017) coined the phrase *plastic representation*, defined as “a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny” (p. 35). Deep, meaningful identity development among Black women beyond the aesthetic and expected performance remains open to investigation. Joseph (2018) theorized strategic ambiguity as the discursive maneuver Black women in media deploy to name racism while sidestepping the angry Black woman trap. Gates (2018) pressed further, contending that so-called negative representations of Black women perform critical cultural work that respectability-driven uplift narratives never could. The embrace of *All American: Homecoming* and *Grown-ish* requires holding these tensions at once, as the shows feature Black women showrunners and dimensional Black women protagonists. Yet they remain commercial products operating within an industry labeled “Hollywood Jim Crow” (Erigha, 2019).

The college-set narratives we examine here belong to a small but meaningful body of media that centers Black collegiate women. Donahoo (2017) observed that Hollywood representations of Black women college students typically frame their selfhood through relationships with men or with White women, leaving Black women to function as props in others’ stories. Wong-Campbell et al. (2024) expanded this analysis through critical race media literacy, demonstrating how college-set series, including *Grown-ish* and *Dear White People*, reproduce or challenge monoracism. White and Harris’ (2022) volume on Mara Brock Akil and Goldman et al.’s (2021) collection on Issa Rae chart how Black women showrunners disrupt these patterns by foregrounding Black women’s interiority, ambition, and friendship. Levy (2021), Sobande (2019), and Brüning (2019) likewise contend that contemporary series, including *Insecure* and *Scandal*, simultaneously contest historical hypersexualization tropes and reproduce post-feminist narratives that obscure the racialized texture of Black women’s lives.

Hip Hop feminism offers an additional analytic resource for reading Black collegiate women on screen. Morgan’s (1999) foundational articulation of a feminism for the post-Civil Rights generation insists on theorizing Black women as subjects who hold contradiction without resolution. Payne and Halliday (2023) advanced this tradition in their concept of ratchet-respectability, asserting that Black college women navigate institutional and popular cultural expectations by simultaneously performing sexually liberated, ratchet, and educated identities. Payne and West’s (2022) Hip Hop feminism model of multiple identities further demonstrates how Black women at PWIs deploy style, voice, and embodied practice to (re)construct womanhood on their own terms. Together, these frameworks reject the binary that has long limited media analysis of Black women, freeing us to engage Simone Hicks and Zoey Johnson as full subjects rather than moral exemplars or cautionary tales.

Limits of PWI Scholarship and the Case for HBCU-Centered Inquiry

Treating HBCU and PWI contexts together, with HBCUs as a primary site of inquiry rather than a control case, addresses a documented limitation in higher education scholarship. In their 30-year synthesis of educational research on Black women, Haynes et al. (2020) concluded that the field has underused intersectionality as methodology and has frequently aggregated Black women into broader racial or gender categories that obscure their distinct experiences. Patton (2016) named this pattern postsecondary prose, or the taken-for-granted ways the academy reproduces racism and White supremacy through curriculum, policy, and research practice. Abes et al. (2019) similarly maintain that the foundational student development theories shaping practice in U.S. higher education rest on samples drawn primarily from White students at PWIs and have not been adequately revised to account for how women of color make meaning.

Even when the literature studies Black women, it often theorizes Black womanhood as defined by its encounter with whiteness. Such framing turns White-dominant institutional culture into the unmarked baseline against which scholars measure Black women's identity, and it produces analytic blind spots regarding how Black women develop identity within Black institutional spaces (Commodore et al., 2018; Mobley, 2017). HBCUs do not stand free of gendered constraint, as Njoku et al. (2017) and Commodore et al. (2020) have illustrated in their work on respectability, othermothering, and the controlling images that swirl around Black women HBCU presidents. At the same time, HBCUs serve as documented sites of cultural affirmation where Black students describe a sense of family rather than alienation (Williams et al., 2022; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018) and where Black women report access to validation, mentorship, and culturally responsive teaching (Williams & Johnson, 2019). Mobley (2017) characterized HBCUs as sites of Black sanctuary in an anti-Black climate, framing them as protective without romanticizing them.

Conceptual Framework

Two interconnected frameworks guide our analysis: imposter phenomenon and progression to womanhood. Imposter phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978) names the internalized doubt people carry about the legitimacy of their own success, a pattern that scholars have demonstrated grows more intense in the face of systemic exclusion and racialized academic environments (Bernard et al., 2020; Clance & Lawry, 2024; Cokley et al., 2013; Peteet et al., 2015). Progression to womanhood (Patterson, 2016) constitutes a culturally specific developmental framework for Black women in higher education that centers mentorship, resistance, and self-definition in identity formation. The ensemble of these two frameworks allows us to examine both the psychological costs and the developmental possibilities that Black collegiate women navigate in racialized institutional contexts.

Existing scholarship on Black collegiate women has often treated intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of identity in isolation. Porter and Dean (2015) examined meaning-making among Black undergraduate women and centered mentorship, community, and institutional validation. Patterson's (2016) framework foregrounds culturally grounded relationships and resistance to dominant narratives, and Johnson et al. (2022) expanded this work by integrating intersectionality and emerging adulthood. Bernard et al. (2020) demonstrated that racial composition shapes imposter feelings, with students at PWIs reporting higher psychological distress, while Cokley et al. (2013) postulated that minority status stress worsens mental health outcomes. What this scholarship has rarely included is sustained attention to the cultural sources Black collegiate women themselves consume and contest. Fictional characters such as Simone Hicks and Zoey Johnson render affective dimensions of Black women's college experience legible in ways empirical research often does not, and engaging them analytically extends rather than replaces the empirical body of research.

PLOT SYNOPSES

All American: Homecoming

All American: Homecoming (Carroll et al., 2022–2024) is a collegiate drama set at the fictional HBCU Brington University in Atlanta, Georgia. Through complex storylines, the series engages leadership, community, identity, resilience, and development within a culturally specific HBCU context. The narrative centers on Simone Hicks, a tennis student-athlete determined to redefine herself in a competitive environment. Her journey echoes challenges familiar to many first-year college athletes: balancing academic demands, navigating new social environments, finding support, and managing the emotional complexities of leaving home. The series also depicts the institutional fabric of an HBCU

through mentorship from Black women administrators and faculty, peer sisterhood in residence halls, and collective response to anti-Black violence, such as the bomb threats targeting HBCU campuses.

Grown-ish

Grown-ish (Anderson et al., 2018–2024) is a collegiate drama set at the fictional California University of Liberal Arts (Cal U), a PWI. The series follows Zoey Johnson, a high-achieving Black woman, as she transitions from high school to college. Zoey arrives as a vibrant, stylish, and socially adept character whose polished surface conceals complexity. Viewed through the lens of White societal norms, her aesthetic and social performance reflect a suburban upbringing and a class-privileged biracial identity. She embraces her self-conception as an ambitious “it girl,” yet her early experiences carry insecurity, impulsiveness, and a longing for external validation. Zoey wrestles with academics, friendships, and romance, and the series tracks her pursuit of independence, her efforts to belong, and her evolving understanding of her racialized, gendered self. Across its seasons, *Grown-ish* depicts how identity development shifts in response to personal successes, setbacks, and the broader social climate of a PWI.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This essay employs a qualitative multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine how popular culture represents the racialized and gendered identity development of Black collegiate women across distinct institutional contexts. Yin’s (2018) approach proved well-suited to the analytic aims of this work because case study research is appropriate for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-world contexts, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and when the investigator seeks to address “how” and “why” questions. The phenomenon under investigation—how institutional culture shapes Black women’s progression to womanhood and exposure to imposter phenomenon—is inseparable from the institutional contexts in which it unfolds, which makes the case study method a fitting choice for theorizing the relationship between identity development and institutional ecology.

The study adopts a holistic multiple-case design (Yin, 2018), with each television series functioning as a bounded case. Case 1 is *All American: Homecoming* (Carroll et al., 2022–2024), set at the fictional HBCU Brington University, and Case 2 is *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018–2024), set at the fictional PWI California University of Liberal Arts. The unit of analysis in each case is the racialized and gendered identity development of the central Black woman protagonist—Simone Hicks in *All American: Homecoming* and Zoey Johnson in *Grown-ish*—as that development unfolds within the institutional context the series depicts. We selected the two cases through purposive sampling guided by Yin’s (2018) replication logic. The cases share a generational cohort, a racial and gender frame, and a collegiate setting, yet differ along the analytically critical dimension of institutional type. This pairing supports theoretical replication, in which the cases are expected to produce contrasting results for predictable reasons, allowing the analysis to specify which features of identity development hold across institutional contexts and which arise from the particular racial ecology of the institution.

Data sources comprised the full available run of each series at the time of analysis, including episode dialogue, narrative arcs, character relationships, visual composition, and depicted institutional practices. Consistent with Yin’s (2018) emphasis on multiple sources of evidence to strengthen construct validity, we triangulated our reading of each series with extant peer-reviewed scholarship on Black women in higher education, Black feminist media studies, and the literature on imposter phenomenon. Each case received an iterative review in which we watched the series, identified episodes and scenes relevant to theoretical propositions, and documented on-screen events in terms of constructs drawn from the framework.

THEORETICAL FINDINGS

Two analytic intentions follow from this body of evidence. First, theorizing Black collegiate women's identity development calls for evidence drawn from settings in which Black women do not principally negotiate with whiteness, and *All American: Homecoming* offers one such fictional setting. Second, juxtaposing HBCU and PWI contexts comparatively allows us to identify which features of Black women's identity development hold across contexts and which arise from the particular racial ecology of the institution. Simone Hicks and Zoey Johnson serve as useful analytic interlocutors precisely because they share a generation, a race, and a gender, yet inhabit institutions whose racial cultures diverge sharply. The variation introduced by institutional context serves as our empirical referent, and our decision to grant HBCUs equal analytic weight pushes back against a literature that has too often treated them as peripheral.

Progression to Womanhood

Identity scholarship has often turned to gender, race, or women's experience separately rather than at their intersection. Patterson's (2016) progression to womanhood addresses this gap by drawing on historical and sociopolitical evidence to describe how Black collegiate women navigate ranked identities (e.g., Black, then woman) and intersectional identities (e.g., Black woman). The framework synthesizes Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality, Erikson's (1980) psychosocial development, college-impact models (Evans et al., 2010), Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological theory, Cross' (1971, 1991) Nigrescence model, and Josselson's (1987) work on women's identity development, and it organizes that synthesis into five tenets: adherent, novitiate, explorer, participant, and contributor. *Adherents* grasp Black womanhood only minimally and rely on authority figures and media for guidance. *Novitiates* encounter challenges that prompt them to question inherited histories and beliefs. *Explorers* actively engage challenges to those beliefs and open themselves to ideologies that affirm Blackness and Black womanhood. *Participants* develop racial and gender identities and grow aware of marginality and otherness. *Contributors* arrive at self-confidence in their identity, place, and role within community; Patterson (2016) noted that they have "resolved feelings of dissonance between themselves and societal norms on race and gender" (p. 76).

Progression to Womanhood in *All American: Homecoming*

The series tracks Simone's journey toward self-discovery, identity development, and empowerment as a Black undergraduate student-athlete. Her resilience and self-definition push back against models of womanhood rooted in historical constraint and respectability (Perkins, 1983), and her arc maps onto three of Patterson's (2016) tenets: explorer, participant, and contributor. When Simone arrives at Bringston, she begins her *explorer* phase by engaging in the campus community while questioning who she is outside her family and her former relationship. She confronts societal expectations, including those that govern the predominantly White sport of tennis. She pushes through microaggressions, refuses to shrink, and works against the underrepresentation of Black women in the sport. She opens herself to ideologies that affirm Blackness and Black womanhood (Cross, 1971), and her early college experience prompts substantive exploration of personal values.

In the *participant* phase, Simone grows more aware of systemic challenges that intersect across her identities as a Black woman, a student-athlete, and a young mother who placed her daughter for adoption. She takes pride in her resilience and her communal ties, building strong relationships with other Black women on campus, including her resident assistant, Keisha, and her aunt Amara, who serves as mentor, administrator, and campus advocate for Simone and her peers. Through mentorship, friendship, and cultural pride at Bringston, Simone embraces her Black womanhood. Amara models leadership, dignity, and cultural pride, reminding Simone of her legacy and the importance of speaking up on and off the court, while Keisha extends a sisterhood grounded in vulnerability, empowerment, and validation.

These culturally responsive relationships align with research indicating that high-quality faculty and peer mentorship at HBCUs predict a sense of mattering and validation for Black women undergraduates (Williams & Johnson, 2019).

Such support gives Simone the footing to advocate for her community when challenges arise at Brington. Whether she advocates for peers, contests unfair decisions, or defends the institution's legacy and culture, she uses her platform to speak out against inequity. She enters the *contributor* phase by assuming leadership roles, including team captaincy, and by making decisions grounded in personal growth and social responsibility. As the campus confronts a wave of racially motivated bomb threats, Simone increasingly grasps her role as a young Black woman within her immediate friend group, across the university, and in the broader HBCU community. Her growing confidence, sense of purpose, and activism reflect a maturing identity shaped by personal experience and collective struggle. Lee-Johnson's (2021) Authentically LEAD framework, which centers Black feminist thought in the leadership development of HBCU undergraduate women, offers a useful theoretical companion for reading Simone's contributor-phase activism.

Progression to Womanhood in Grown-ish

Zoey's arc in *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018–2024) closely tracks Patterson's (2016) framework. She begins college firmly in the *adherent* stage—polished, image-conscious, and concerned with how others perceive her. She inhabits familiar “cool girl” and “fashion icon” archetypes, and her choices align with external markers of success, including her social media presence and standing within her friend group. She conforms to norms of desirability and achievement shaped by her privileged upbringing and by broader media representations of young Black women in elite environments. Although she wishes to belong at Cal U, she has not yet defined who she is. As she navigates friendships, romantic relationships, and academic and career goals, Zoey enters the *novitiate* phase. Her image as the put-together girl crumbles when she recognizes she cannot maintain the appearance of perfection. She grows aware that her racial and gendered experiences differ from those of her peers. Significant moments, including her cheating scandal and the end of her relationship with Luca, mark turning points that teach her that defining herself entails vulnerability, accountability, and the acceptance of failure. As Williams and Lewis (2021) maintained, Black women cannot define womanhood outside the social forces that shape the intersection of race and gender. Zoey's experiences confronting stereotypes, carrying the burden of the strong Black woman stereotype, and learning to advocate for herself in the classroom illustrate these tensions.

Zoey's *explorer* phase unfolds through trial and error. Her missteps, including mismanaging her internship and crossing professional boundaries, become opportunities to define herself and set limits. She experiments with different identities (stylist, designer, influencer, creative) while reaching for purpose beyond aesthetics or popularity. She begins to engage her race, class, and gender, recognizing how privilege and marginalization both inform her experience as a Black woman raised in affluence. Perkins (1983) explained how controlling images from the cult of true womanhood historically excluded Black women from mainstream femininity. *Grown-ish* reveals that those legacies persist. When Zoey buckles under the pressures of perfectionism and over-responsibility, the show reflects societal expectations that Payne and West (2022) argue: Black women must contest as they redefine womanhood on their own terms.

In seasons two and three, Zoey reaches the *participant* stage. Her growth shows in her willingness to take responsibility for others rather than merely for her image. In “Self Care” (Anderson et al., 2019, Season 2, Episode 16), she begins to take responsibility for her friends' well-being. By the series' end, Zoey arrives at the *contributor* stage as she launches her fashion career and brings her values into her work. Her choices reflect personal ambition alongside cultural accountability; she uses her

platform to elevate Black creativity and authenticity. Her arc echoes Patterson's (2016) claim that womanhood is not fixed but constitutes an ongoing reflexive practice of becoming.

Imposter Phenomenon

Clance and Imes (1978) identified what they termed the "imposter phenomenon," an internalized, chronic self-doubt that competent individuals carry despite objective evidence of success. Their study traced the development, characteristics, and therapeutic understanding of the phenomenon, with a particular focus on high-achieving women who attributed their accomplishments to luck, timing, or others' overestimations of their abilities. They linked these psychological patterns to broader gender and socialization processes, laying the foundation for decades of research on imposterism across gender, race, and professional settings. Clance and Lawry (2024) refined this conceptualization, depicting the phenomenon as a multidimensional pattern involving self-doubt, perfectionism, external attribution, discounting of success, and cyclical overwork, all rooted in early family experiences and reinforced by societal expectations. Imposter phenomenon, they emphasized, does not constitute a clinical disorder but a pattern of thinking and feeling in which individuals fear being found out as incompetent and struggle to internalize positive feedback. Family patterns that emphasize achievement or supply inconsistent feedback can teach individuals to attribute success to factors outside the self.

Cokley et al. (2013) expounded on Clance and Imes' (1978) work by suggesting that women and members of minoritized racial groups face heightened vulnerability to imposter feelings because gender-role stereotypes and systemic inequities undermine internal validation. Imposter phenomenon rests on seven central themes that explain how high-achieving individuals experience persistent self-doubt and feelings of intellectual fraudulence in the face of objective evidence of competence. In their original study, they did not examine Black women or race-based experiences. Subsequent research has revealed that Black students, and Black women in particular, experience imposter feelings differently because racial stereotypes, gendered expectations, and underrepresentation in predominantly White academic spaces compound those experiences (Bernard et al., 2020; Cokley et al., 2013). Peteet et al. (2015) examined the phenomenon among African American college students and emphasized how racial identity development shapes self-doubt and academic belonging. A strong, affirmed racial identity functioned as a protective factor in their study, while a weakened or conflicted racial identity heightened vulnerability to self-doubt and marginalization. Most consequentially, McGee et al. (2022) maintained that what PWI campus administrators often label as imposter syndrome is more accurately understood as racism camouflaged as imposterism. They contend that structural racism positions Black students as imposters, and that individualizing this experience as a private psychological pattern obscures the institutional conditions that produce it. Tulshyan and Burey (2021) likewise propose reframing the phenomenon as a logical response to exclusionary systems rather than a personal deficit. We apply this structural reframing in the analysis that follows.

Imposter Phenomenon in *All American: Homecoming*

Simone's progression to womanhood weaves through her negotiation of imposter feelings (Clance & Lawry, 2024). She moves through drive for success, fear of failure, conflict, work style, task completion, and cognitive dissonance—the simultaneity of success and negative self-evaluation. Reddick et al. (2023) maintained that the psychological burden of imposterism and discrimination taxes Black women both mentally and physically. As Simone navigates her life as a student-athlete, she silently questions whether she belongs on her team and at a prestigious HBCU. The pressure triggers panic attacks, particularly during a televised tennis match in which she loses composure and self-confidence. Her support systems, including friendships and mentorship, help her overcome self-doubt by communicating their belief in her capacity. Friends and her aunt show up at her matches and visit her residence hall and apartment to offer reassurance, encouragement, and a listening ear.

Simone's experience also overlaps with the strong Black woman script, which presumes Black women are caretaking-oriented and will put others' needs above their own (West et al., 2016). Reddick et al. (2023) observed that this script can damage Black women's health. Although Bringston is an HBCU that affirms Simone's racial identity, her self-doubt reflects a broader societal pressure on Black women to be flawless and exceptional. Her upbringing in a family that emphasized achievement contributes to the *family- and society-based* dimension of the phenomenon, and her awareness of systemic inequity in athletics and academics intensifies these pressures.

Simone's internal struggle with worthiness mirrors the *persistent belief in intellectual fraudulence*. Although she is a talented player, she questions whether she belongs at Bringston. She wonders whether her potential rather than her actual achievement explains her opportunities, and she credits her success to luck or to mentors and coaches. This response embodies the *attribution of success to external factors* that Clance and Imes (1978) described. She also exhibits *perfectionism and fear of failure*, pushing herself to appear flawless in academics and athletics. As she balances the roles of friend, student, and athlete, she fears that any setback will prove undeserved. Rather than treating mistakes as opportunities, she interprets them as personal shortcomings. She compensates with extra drills, late-night study, and hours of practice—behaviors consistent with the cyclical *overwork and overpreparation* Clance and Lawry (2024) identified. Even when others praise her, she *discounts or minimizes the feedback*, insisting she has more to prove. Simone also embodies the *emotional distress and anxiety* dimension of imposter phenomenon. The academic, athletic, and social pressures she absorbs produce stress, anxiety, and isolation—evidence that imposter feelings carry material mental health consequences (Clance & Lawry, 2024).

Through Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality work, Simone's experiences corroborate Cokley et al.'s (2013) and Peteet et al.'s (2015) findings that racialized and gendered expectations intensify imposter phenomenon for women of color. Over time, her growing relationships with mentors and peers, alongside her cultural identity, function as protective resources, in keeping with Peteet et al.'s (2015) finding that an affirmed racial identity reduces the intensity of imposter feelings. The HBCU does not erase her experience of imposterism, but it offers cultural and relational scaffolding that softens its severity and quickens her access to community-based meaning-making (Williams et al., 2022). Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, particularly its categories of aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital, names the resources Simone draws upon.

Imposter Phenomenon in *Grown-ish*

Zoey's experience in *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018–2024) offers an extended exploration of how imposter phenomenon takes shape in the lives of Black college women navigating PWIs. From her first semester at Cal U, she lives a *persistent belief in intellectual fraudulence*. Although she stood out in high school, college places her among other talented and ambitious individuals, and she begins to question her competence. Struggling in her fashion marketing class, missing deadlines, and receiving public reprimands from professors for unprofessional behavior all underscore her self-doubt. Rather than treating these challenges as ordinary adjustments, she reads them as proof that she does not belong. Her experience illustrates Tulshyan and Burey's (2021) and McGee et al.'s (2022) contention that imposterism among Black students at PWIs amounts to less than a private deficit and more to a logical response to environments that designers did not build with their needs in mind.

For all her outwardly self-assured presentation, Zoey harbors deep insecurity. She subconsciously *attributes her success to external factors*, including luck, connections, and appearance, rather than skill or effort. She often credits her proximity to privilege or her social charm, which exemplifies a relentless need for external validation. Early in her college experience, she believes she will effortlessly run the school. The narrative quickly disrupts that confidence and exposes underlying perfectionistic insecurity.

Perfectionism defines Zoey's response to college life. She curates her image meticulously through fashion, academics, and social media, and she steers clear of situations that might expose imperfection. This relentless pursuit of flawlessness reflects both fear of failure and fear of exposure. It also reflects the documented double standard faced by Black women, who often face the expectation of being twice as good to be considered competent (Donahoo, 2023; Lewis et al., 2016). When professors or mentors compliment her creativity, she *discounts the praise* by hesitating, by self-deprecating, by calling herself lucky, or by still figuring it out. By minimizing recognition, she defends herself against potential failure, and the response exposes a disconnect between external validation and internal self-perception.

Zoey's drive to do it all reflects how many women of color in academic spaces respond to systemic doubts about their competence: by *overcompensating*. *Overworking and overpreparation* lead to burnout and fuel the imposter cycle. Her self-doubt produces *anxiety and emotional distress*, including panic during presentations, fear of disappointing others, and a tendency to magnify setbacks. Her *early family and societal influences* further shape this experience. Growing up in a high-achieving, image-conscious family, she internalized both privilege and the pressure to maintain a particular standard. Societal narratives that frame Black women's success as conditional or exceptional reinforce the belief that their accomplishments must always meet external validation, and their identity sits at the intersection of two pressures: representing Black excellence while navigating gendered expectations of likability and perfection.

Peteet et al. (2015) determined that imposter feelings among African American students grow more acute when racial identities become salient and gendered expectations weigh more heavily, and both dynamics surface in Zoey's narrative. Her psychological unraveling heightens once she loses her internship and lands on academic probation. This trajectory accords with Bernard et al. (2020), who documented the psychological toll of PWI life, where Black students experience hypervisibility (the keen awareness of being seen) yet feel undervalued and marginalized. Newton (2023) characterized this hypervisibility-invisibility paradox as a defining feature of Black women's gendered racial microaggressions on White campuses, and Zoey's classroom and workplace scenes show the pattern in motion. Burton et al. (2024) reported that 30% of Black college women at a PWI in their study met the threshold for depression, and 54% reported severe psychological distress, with gendered racism showing the strongest relationship to depression. Alongside Lewis et al. (2016) and Corbin et al. (2018), these findings situate Zoey's emotional life within a structural pattern rather than a private one.

Comparative Analysis: Institutional Context, Class, and the Differential Operation of Protective Resources

Viewing Simone and Zoey side by side reveals patterns that single-character analyses miss. Both women experience imposter phenomenon despite occupying institutions with very different racial cultures, and both move through Patterson's (2016) developmental phases, yet the conditions of that movement diverge in instructive ways. The persistence of imposter feelings across institutional contexts suggests that racial-cultural affirmation does not eliminate imposterism. Bringston is a fictional HBCU, yet Simone still doubts her belonging to the tennis team and her place in a prestigious Black institution. Cal U is a fictional PWI, and Zoey's class privilege does not insulate her from the same set of patterns. Through McGee et al.'s (2022) reframing of imposterism as racism camouflaged, the comparison points to a systemic devaluation that Black women carry across institutional types, even as institutions structure that experience differently.

What differs is the availability and the types of protective resources offered. At Bringston, Simone's protective resources sit institutionally embedded. Black women administrators (Amara) and Black women peers (Keisha) provide mentorship within a campus culture that legibly affirms Black womanhood. Yosso's (2005) categories of aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital come to life in

residence halls, athletic programs, and the collective campus response to anti-Black violence. Cooper et al. (2017) compared Black women athletes at an HBCU and a historically White institution and concluded that community cultural wealth supported success in both contexts but was more readily activated at HBCUs because the institutional culture recognized and rewarded it. Simone's progression illustrates this pattern: the HBCU does not produce her identity, but it lowers the cost of the developmental work she undertakes.

At Cal U, by contrast, Zoey constructs her protective resources individually, and they prove more fragile. Her closest network gathers other students of color and queer students, but the institutional context does not actively affirm Black womanhood. Mentorship occurs despite, rather than because of, the institutional environment, a pattern Domingue (2015) documented in her study of Black women student leaders at PWIs and one consistent with Porter's (2022) call to reimagine belonging beyond a survival paradigm. Zoey's navigational and resistant capital exist, but accessing and translating them costs her substantial labor. Her class privilege, often celebrated within the show, does not function as a shield against gendered racism. As Donahoo (2023) demonstrated regarding Black hair and professionalism, the embodied politics of being a Black woman in White-dominant institutions resists purchase. Class, in other words, modifies but does not interrupt the operation of gendered racism. This reading extends Patterson's (2016) framework by arguing that progress toward the contributor phase calls for more than individual readiness; it necessitates institutional conditions that enable developmental work to proceed without depleting protective capital.

A third pattern concerns the differential operation of mentorship. At HBCUs, mentorship of Black women, whether implicit or explicit, is embedded in institutional and community cultural expectations or missions, and Black women in formal roles more often deliver it (Lee-Johnson, 2021; Williams & Johnson, 2019; Williams et al., 2022). At PWIs, Black women piece together mentorship across racially affinity-based student organizations, sympathetic faculty, and counterspaces they themselves create (Domingue, 2015; Patton & Haynes, 2018). The implication is not that PWIs lack mentorship, but that Black women bear a disproportionate share of the labor of cultivating it, consistent with Haynes et al.'s (2020) finding that Black women in higher education routinely carry out invisible institutional work. A theoretical extension of progression to womanhood should therefore specify that developmental progression rests on institutional infrastructure for mentorship rather than on mentorship alone.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations attend this analysis. First, both *All American: Homecoming* and *Grown-ish* are commercial television products operating under racialized industry constraints (Erigha, 2019). As Warner (2017) cautioned, demographic visibility does not always produce dimensional representation, and we do not assume the protagonists' experiences map onto those of actual Black collegiate women. Both shows present narratively compressed, dramatically heightened versions of college life, and they may romanticize particular relationships or simplify systemic problems. Second, the protagonists carry a limited representational scope. Simone and Zoey are both conventionally attractive, light- to medium-skinned, non-disabled, cisgender, and either heterosexual or only briefly queer-coded. At the same time, darker-skinned Black women, Black women with disabilities, Black trans women, Black queer women, and international Black students remain largely absent from the central narratives. Third, we do not empirically examine audience reception; this is a theoretical reading rather than a study of how Black collegiate women interpret these popular culture artifacts. Future research might combine media analysis with audience-centered methods (Chatman, 2015; Joseph, 2018). Finally, the essay focuses on two institutional types and does not address community colleges, Hispanic-serving institutions, tribal colleges, or other minority-serving institutions that enroll significant numbers of Black women.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, PRACTICE, AND POLICY

Implications for Theory

The analysis advances theory in three directions. First, it draws attention to Patterson's (2016) progression to womanhood framework by attending to each developmental phase. The novitiate and explorer phases, in which Black women question inherited beliefs and engage challenges to those beliefs, may carry particular vulnerability to imposter feelings because they involve dissonance between authentic self-concept and dominant cultural expectations of competence, professionalism, and femininity. The participant and contributor phases call for sustained institutional conditions—mentorship infrastructure, culturally responsive curricula, and counterspaces—that allow the developmental work to consolidate without exhausting protective resources. Specified in this way, progression to womanhood treats institutional infrastructure as a constitutive variable rather than as context.

Second, the analysis takes up McGee et al.'s (2022) reframing of imposterism as racism camouflaged, asserting that the imposter phenomenon among Black collegiate women belongs to the realm of structural and relational phenomena rather than private psychology. Following Tulshyan and Burey (2021), this reframing relocates the diagnostic gaze from the individual to the institution and aligns with a Black feminist epistemology that refuses to individualize systemic harm (Collins, 2022; Patton & Haynes, 2018). One concrete proposition follows: future scholarship should distinguish between the symptom-level features Clance and Imes (1978) and Clance and Lawry (2024) identified and the structural drivers that generate those symptoms in racialized institutional contexts. This distinction matters for measurement, for intervention, and for how the field communicates with Black women students about their experiences.

Third, scholars should theorize progression to womanhood and imposter phenomenon jointly with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth, hooks' (1992) oppositional gaze, or Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality frameworks. Community cultural wealth provides an asset-based vocabulary for the protective resources Black women draw upon, whereas the oppositional gaze names how Black women interpret cultural artifacts—including those of their own institutional lives—against the dominant interpretive frame. Intersectionality grounds our media-analytic method by insisting that cultural representation itself constitutes a site of intersectional power. Future research should also examine how queerness, disability, immigration status, motherhood, and socioeconomic position further shape these dynamics, given that intersectional identities remain underexplored in much existing developmental scholarship (Haynes et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2022).

Implications for Higher Education Practice

Practitioners do the day-to-day work that turns policy commitments into campus culture. Three practice implications follow. First, faculty and staff training should equip practitioners to recognize and respond to gendered racial microaggressions, biased advising, and curricular exclusion. Lewis et al.'s (2016) typology of gendered racial microaggressions—projected stereotypes (Jezebel, angry Black woman), silencing and marginalization, and assumptions about style and beauty—offers a tractable framework for training. Institutional climate surveys should incorporate gendered racial microaggression items rather than rely on race-only or gender-only items that obscure Black women's specific experiences (Burton et al., 2024; Newton, 2023).

Institutions should design mentorship structures intentionally rather than leave them to informal accumulation. At HBCUs, formal mentorship programs that pair Black women undergraduates with Black women administrators and alumnae build on cultural infrastructure already in place (Lee-Johnson, 2021; Williams & Johnson, 2019). At PWIs, where institutions often construct mentorship against the grain of

their own culture, programs should compensate Black women faculty and staff who provide mentorship rather than treat it as an unremunerated service expectation (Domingue, 2015; Haynes et al., 2020). Peer-to-peer Sista Circles that center Black women's voices and supply a structured counterspace for collective meaning-making provide a complementary outlet for community bonding, empowerment, and authenticity (Davis & Peters, 2023).

Programming should be grounded in healing-centered engagement and asset-based pedagogies. Ginwright (2016) distinguished healing-centered engagement from trauma-informed care by foregrounding agency, culture, and collective healing rather than individual deficit. Practitioners who reframe imposter feelings as a logical response to exclusionary systems, following Tulshyan and Burey (2021) and McGee et al. (2022), help Black women shift from self-blame to structural analysis. Skill-building opportunities such as research apprenticeships, writing collectives, and leadership development programs should pair with explicit affirmation of belonging and curricular content that centers Black feminist thought (Collins, 2022; hooks, 1994). Popular culture itself can serve as pedagogical material. First-year seminars and student development courses might use scenes from *All American: Homecoming* and *Grown-ish* as discussion prompts that allow students to articulate their own experiences in conversation with those of Simone and Zoey, building meaning-making capacity in the explorer and participant phases of progression to womanhood (Abes et al., 2007).

Implications for Higher Education Policy

Higher education policy must confront the structural conditions that shape Black women's identity development, sense of belonging, and exposure to the imposter phenomenon. We propose five steps. First, institutions should adopt intersectional accountability metrics that simultaneously disaggregate retention, persistence, GPA, mental health service utilization, time-to-degree, and graduation rates by race and gender. Reporting metrics should include the percentages of Black women in tenure-track faculty, senior administrative roles, and student leadership positions. Aggregate racial or gender categories obscure the experiences of Black women, and disaggregation renders accountability auditable.

Moreover, institutions should commit a defined percentage of student affairs and academic affairs budgets to identity-affirming programming, including sister-circle programs, Black women's mentorship initiatives, and culturally responsive mental health services. A public benchmark, comparable to those required for Title IX or accessibility compliance, would generate budgetary visibility for what institutions have often treated as a discretionary line item. Where possible, Black women clinicians or clinicians trained in gendered racism and the strong Black woman script should deliver mental health services (Burton et al., 2024; West et al., 2016).

Additionally, institutions should redefine professionalism and competence in ways that do not reinforce White-patriarchal norms. Donahoo (2023) demonstrated how professional standards related to hair, dress, voice, and affect operate as racialized, gendered surveillance. Sample policy language might explicitly state that natural and protective hairstyles, African American Vernacular English, and culturally specific styles of address count as protected forms of professional self-presentation. The CROWN Act of 2022 (2022) offers a legislative model that institutions can localize through dress and grooming policies.

Finally, federal and state policymakers should increase funding for HBCUs and address the long-documented funding gap that disadvantages HBCUs relative to peer PWIs (Mobley, 2017; Williams et al., 2022). Specific examples include increasing Title III funding, eliminating the burden of state matching requirements that have systematically disadvantaged public HBCUs, and creating dedicated grant streams for Black women-focused programming at HBCUs and PWIs. As such, a fifth recommendation calls for institutional governance and assessment policies to consult and include Black women students, faculty, and staff in designing accountability measures rather than imposing metrics from above, historically

grounded in normalized whiteness or White supremacy. Patton and Haynes (2018) argued that institutional transformation requires a shift from single-axis identity politics to intersectional accountability, and Haynes et al. (2020) demonstrated that intersectionality carries the greatest analytic force when deployed as a methodology rather than as language.

CONCLUSION

Repurposing *All American: Homecoming* and *Grown-ish* as theoretical artifacts brings forward the affective, relational, and culturally specific texture of Black collegiate women's identity development that empirical scholarship alone has struggled to make visible. The comparative juxtaposition of an HBCU and a PWI illustrates that institutional context shapes the availability and efforts of protective resources rather than determining whether Black women will encounter racialized gendered devaluation. Imposter feelings persist across institutional types, but the developmental work of progression to womanhood becomes materially easier when institutional culture affirms Black womanhood as a baseline rather than treating it as an exception. Policy, practice, and theory must reject the individualization of systemic harm and place Black women's self-definition at the heart of preparing for and persisting through the higher education experience.

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