2016

The Receptivity of Black Audiences to Progressive Black Television

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Abstract

This work examines the concept of blackness, how it has been performed on two different primetime television programs, *The Cosby Show* and *Black-ish*, and how black audiences in particular have responded to these representations of African-Americans. In analysis of *The Cosby Show*, I have mostly used secondary sources to distill the various positions viewers took regarding the show's blackness, which has in fact been the subject of much critical analysis. These works substitute for the extensive research that would have been necessary on my part otherwise between watching 200+ episodes and conducting long and detailed interviews. For *Black-ish*, however, no academic studies or analyses of the show have been conducted as of yet, therefore I have dealt with the show mostly as a primary source when discerning how audiences have received the show's representation of blackness. The focus of this research paper is not to differentiate between these two shows, but rather to gage their respective audiences' receptivity to revolutionary claims to blackness.

The Receptivity of Black Audiences to Progressive Black-Television

The show *Sanford & Son*, airing between 1972 and 1977, centered around Fred Sanford and his son Lamont Sanford living together in Watts, Los Angeles, very accurately capturing the sort of stereotypical formation of blackness which had dominated primetime network television until the 1980's. Fred and Lamont are often lazy, disrespectful, and angry. The most prominent female character, Fred's sister in-law Esther, is just as aggressive as them. Recurring characters Smitty and Hoppy are a pair of police officers who occasionally visit the Sanfords. When white officer Hoppy speaks, black officer Smitty must translate Hoppy's language into Jive for the Sanfords, who are unable to communicate otherwise. Characterizations of African-Americans as poor an uneducated perpetuate stereotypical conceptualizations of blackness, still common today.

A discussion of blackness, however, is as much about what is considered genuine as what is stereotypical. While the authentic, or accurate, and positive representation of African-Americans in the media is a concern for many black people, how do we define authenticity? In his book *Authentic Blackness* (1999), J. Martin Favor suggests that stereotypes of blackness are partially rooted in slavery and most African-Americans' socioeconomic status as lower and working class. He refers to the African-American culture emerging from enslavement as "folk—southern, rural, and, poor"—one of the predominant markers in "the critical discourse of blackness," he continues (4). According to Favor, black scholar Houston Baker (b. 1943) "[implied] that the best way to understand blackness in America is to scrutinize the lower classes, where, in his view, the most authentic blackness was to be found" (4). To summarize Favor's argument, Baker's theorizing of blackness has heavily, though not exclusively, drawn from a single demographic within the black community, resulting in a viewpoint of blackness today

which largely excludes African-Americans outside of that demographic. Certainly, the majority of African-Americans have always been poor, but Baker did not say that the lower class was the only one through which blackness could be understood.

Through the persistence of this black underclass, however, Baker's claim has been generalized, many African-Americans believing that authentic blackness entails strict adherence to the poor-lifestyle. This oversimplification has excluded the voices of wealthy and upper-class African-Americans (among others), invalidating their experiences as black people by voiding their ability to be black. By locating the authenticity of blackness in southern folk or socioeconomic class, the black community now looks to these lifestyles to define blackness. Definition of blackness encourages African-Americans to believe that there is a definitive way to be black. Since only these lifestyles are granted authenticity, or credibility, they limit which African-Americans can be black: much of the black community believes that, amongst themselves, an individual can be black only after fitting this archetype.

Because the authentic performance of blackness now relies on the totalization of Baker's tenant in defining authenticity, it contradicts black Americans' desires to be portrayed positively: the representation accepted as most accurate, is that of the poor black, but that depiction is inherently limited and usually negative. Since authenticity, or accurate representation, has come to mean the same thing as stereotypical, it is difficult to perform blackness authentically but not stereotypically. Any definition of blackness is limiting but performing this version of authenticity may actually reinforce black stereotypes. Completely un-defining blackness, as we will see through analysis of critical receptions for *The Cosby Show* and *Black-ish*, can be done only by combating stereotypes as well as their authority granted by this authentic blackness.

I will compare *The Cosby Show* and *Black-ish* as a means of assessing how receptive audiences, black viewers particularly, have been to different methods of challenging authentic blackness. According to Robin R. Means Coleman, "A 1991 *Jet* article… [reported] that African-Americans [watched] more television, 49% more, than any other group" (272). Today that number has dropped to 37% but still shows that black Americans are significantly more interested in television than other races (Garcia).[1] African-Americans for at least the past three decades or so have been watching more television than any other race in the United States, thus television offers a strong lens on how black viewers have reacted to race in black shows. Additionally, Kristal Brent Zook elaborates that black television has dealt with exclusion of groups and individuals *within* the race, *intra*-racial discrimination, thus making black television a powerful medium for examining the performance of blackness (1-2). *The Cosby Show* and *Black-ish* have also had relatively strong African-American followings, indicating their relevance to wide African-American audiences. Lastly the shows' to central families have very similar compositions and demographical statistics, making for an easier contrast.

Starring Bill Cosby and having aired for eight seasons on NBC between 1984 and 1992, *The Cosby Show* featured the Huxtables, an upper middle-class African-American family living in a Brooklyn brownstone. Following Cliff Huxtable and his nuclear family, the show was a sitcom but occasionally adopted a more serious tone. Above all else, the Huxtables were a normal American family. *The Cosby Show* holds "the unique distinction of earning record-breaking ratings and phenomenal popularity across demographic boundaries" (Coleman, 199).

ABC's *Black-ish*, airing since 2014, closely mirrors *The Cosby Show*, focusing on

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[1] Both of these statistics refer to the number of hours spent watching television: if in 1991 African-Americans watched 149 hours of television, then everyone else collectively watched only 100 hours.

another upper middle-class black family, the Johnsons with patriarch Andre "Dre" Johnson Sr. *Black-ish* is also a sitcom, but, like *The Cosby Show*, *Black-ish* has also shown itself capable of being serious. Both shows try to redefine the present meaning of blackness, albeit taking vastly different approaches. Their representations of black people respectively challenge the dogma which has aligned blackness with masculinity, poverty, criminality, and backwardness.[2]

If being black has been oversimplified to being poor, then *The Cosby Show*, the first show about a perfect black family, was revolutionary, showing viewers a well-educated and financially secure African-American family. One of the few shows that featured an all-black cast, its appeal to African-Americans is obvious. Far from being a typical black family, the Huxtables also garnered the attention of whites. Moreover, the humor was clever, avoiding the cheap-gags and catchphrases, characteristic of sticoms. Most important to my discussion of audience reception, however, is how the show dealt with race.

The Cosby Show presented the idea that a black family could have financial success and education equal to that of a white one as a truism, but there was much ambivalence in the black community over whether or not black success should be taken as given. In 1995, Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin, compiled 100 comprehensive interviews with middle-class blacks about black media-representation and produced a critical analysis of how their respondents received *Cosby*. It is important to distinguish that, while respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the Huxtables were "positive role models for all Black Americans," most also believed that the Huxtables being African-Americans did not necessarily make them relatable (Inniss, 704-5).

By the 1980's, a growing class of black elites had emerged thanks to the civil rights

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[2] For more information on the socializing of black female bodies as aggressive and hyper-sexual or lusting, read *Colored Amazons* by Kali N. Gross.

movement, but still "very few black families in America [held] the economic status of the Huxtables" (Ferguson, 7). We know that Cliff was a doctor and his wife a lawyer, but not exactly how they grew up. Without this information it may be that the Cliff and his family have always had more opportunity than common black families and never faced significant financial hardships. Black viewers thus may receive the Huxtables' wealth as denying socioeconomic realities that much of the community faces: "I do know that this is just entertainment. But my kids think it's the way we should live. That it unfair. It is unfair for me to explain to my son that, no… these things don't work that way. I think it's really sad" (qtd. Inniss, 700).

This non-disclosure "is highly detrimental to the viewers who watch it, since people may look at the Huxtables as an ordinary family, when, statistically, they are not" (Ferguson, 7). Since the Huxtables were not stereotypically black enough, black audiences considered them a utopic representation of black life. The show's blackness was weakened because black audiences felt that a perfect, assimilated, black family did not resonate with their experiences.[3]

Authentic blackness now capturing many stereotypical qualities, from a black perspective, African-Americans like the Huxtables are not necessarily black. In his novel *Appropriating Blackness*, E. Patrick Johnson writes:

> [This viewpoint] stems from the belief that black economic mobility necessarily breeds assimilation and race traitors because of interracial mixing. Moreover, there is an assumption that educated blacks are more likely to disavow their racial "roots" than might their poor and illiterate brothers and sisters. Although this rhetoric is problematic on many counts, one of its more disturbing aspects is that

[3] To the contrary, some of Inniss' respondents argue *The Cosby Show* is not responsible for accurately representing African-Americans, because most of television is unreality. Although they conceded that the show was not realistic.

> it confounds class and race such that it links racial authenticity with a certain kind of primitivism and anti-intellectualism. (23)

The Cosby Show's assumption of black success incidentally subjects the Huxtables to being received by black audience as "sell-outs." One of the respondents for Inniss' interviews said of the Huxtables: "To me, all you're looking at is White people in blackface performing on television" (qtd. 700). Another respondent spoke on the show's "false image of assimilation to White culture," implying assimilation is not as simple as the Huxtables make it seem (700). They were excellent models of what heights black people could reach, but black viewers felt the Huxtables betrayed popular notions of blackness. So *The Cosby Show*'s truism did not effectively communicate the idea of black success, because many African-Americans viewed the Huxtables as "white" and subsequently disassociated with them.

Additionally, black audiences were wary of the show's social implications. Speaking strictly for the African-American community, black audiences widely believed the Huxtables were an uplifting perspective on blackness. Notably, concerns about *Cosby*'s unreality mostly centered around white-audience perceptions of blacks, because the American racial hierarchy "only lets [them] seem [themselves] through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois, 3).

Whereas black audiences had been ambivalent, "[white audiences,]" write Mike Bubb and Clay Steinman, "[seemed] all too willing to take *The Cosby Show* and its wealthy characters as one sign among many that racism [had] declined." When *Cosby* was enjoying its highest ratings, a "1988 Newsweek poll found 80 percent of whites [saw] no need for affirmative action policies to redress racial discrimination." (Budd). According to Inniss, a 1992 report on white focus groups that watched *The Cosby Show* revealed: "The show was taken by Whites as proving

that anyone can make it in the United States and that Black Americans should stop complaining about discrimination. On the other hand, Whites articulated the view that the [Huxtables] were not like most Black Americans. This contradiction is rationalized by the Whites in the study by the failure and laziness of other Blacks" (693). Thus *The Cosby Show*, as some African-Americans feared, contributed to the emergence of colorblind racism, which allowed whites to argue that racism was no longer a problem for the black community. Indeed, one of Inniss' respondents said, "If anybody looked at *The Cosby Show*, they'd think that everybody in the Black community has arrived like that, and it's just not true" (qtd. 699). Black viewers largely did not view *Cosby* as realistic in the way of blackness,[4] thus its success among blacks seems more related to its entertainment value than its representation of black people and racism.

One of the biggest critics of *The Cosby Show* was that it implied that African-Americans did not face racial discrimination. Contrary to *Cosby*, *Black-ish* does not present racial equality as a truism. *Black-ish* deals with blackness quite explicitly, thus inviting black viewership: indeed, 73% of African-Americans believe that racism is one of the most pressing issues facing the United States ("Across Racial Lines"). Dara, a black woman and creator of the blog *Truly Tafakari*, writes: "As opposed to honoring father and family (as on *Cosby*), *Black-ish* more concerns itself with identifying Black heritage and how to honor it." On the other hand, the show's reliance on racial humor may deter black audiences, who will view jokes as racist, and white audiences, who may miss the humor entirely. Nonetheless, black viewers compose 24% of the show's audience, remarkable next to their ~13% share of the total U.S. population (Pallota).

Following another upper-middle class family, *Black-ish* must validate its atypical

[4] Some of Inniss's respondents related to the show, but she notes that these respondents connected to "common family problems," not anything that they felt was decidedly *black* (703).

representation of African-Americans for black viewers. The show is able to bridge the gap between atypical representation and the expected authenticity through narrative. We learn that Dre spent his childhood in an inner-city neighborhood and acquired success through academic achievement, thus his story is more relatable and authentic for the black majority. Since claiming a black family can be successful contends the stereotypical defining of blackness, *Black-ish* expounds the contradiction for skeptical black audiences.

Dre's childhood-struggles and earned-success authenticate the premise of a non-poor black family. Dre's blackness is also bolstered by his concern that his family is not black enough. Rather than being a traitor to the race, as the Huxtable family was, Dre is the opposite working tirelessly to ensure that his family does not shame the black community. Dre's concern for his family's lack of blackness proactively recognizes that their lifestyle betrays typical notions of blackness and authenticates his own blackness from a black audience perspective by differentiating him from his less-than-black family: thus, in the eyes of the black viewer, Dre is not as black as he could be, but his concern may recover what his white-suburban life forsakes. As we have seen from reactions to *Cosby*, black viewers are ambivalent towards atypical black characters. However, the *Black-ish* is believable because authenticity is located within Dre, and "authentic" blackness is all he wants for his family.

Interestingly, this concession to the authority of black authenticity, creates a space for *Black-ish* to challenge that authority. One of Dre's running-jokes is that his wife, Rainbow (Bow), is not particularly black because her skin color is pale. Dre's joke perpetuates the common belief that darker skin is one of the qualities that makes an African-American more authentically black. This sort of colorism within the black community has effectively pushed

those of lighter skin tones to the periphery of the community.

Bow's ridicules the sentiment that paler skin makes her less black: it is ridiculous and ironic that she he exclude her for her skin color. Her challenge to Dre's belief, common in the black community, encourages black viewers to reconsider authenticity and consider how it could be harmful. Dre's mentality represents "authentic" blackness, and every time his family challenges him or his confidence in stereotypical definitions of blackness falters, the authority of authentic blackness is undermined. Viewers are shown that an African-American family can be successful, and challenged to rethink blackness. By undermining attempts to define blackness, the Johnsons' representation of African-Americans becomes as valid as any other.

The second season premiere episode, titled "The Word," features Dre and Bow navigating usage of the n-word after their youngest son Jack is expelled from school for saying it in a rap. The episode is light-hearted but expertly captures many of the viewpoints on a contentious topic in the black community and America at large. Initially Dre believes that black people should use it, but he realizes that he may be wrong, explaining to Jack to learn about the word's historical context before deciding whether or not to use it.

The diversity of opinion among black characters gives the episode life. Whether or not using the n-word is appropriate the importance of this episode is that it does not offer a definitive answer, thus revealing the complexity of blackness, a typical theme of the show. Dara explains that the show appeals to her because it does not tell viewers how to be black: "It encourages Black children to be 'different' and still find pride in their version of Blackness;" and *Black-ish* leaves you to enjoy the Johnson family without compelling you to *be* the Johnson family."

It it is important, however, to draw a distinction between the discussions of blackness

within the Johnson household and outside of it in their larger, predominantly white, community. Whereas at home the Johnsons challenge authentic blackness for black audiences, in their community the Johnsons challenge stereotypical notions of blackness for white audiences. We never saw how the Huxtables dealt with racial discrimination and micro-aggressions at school or at work, but navigating these spaces as a minority is an important theme in *Black-ish*, thus the show guards against colorblind-racist interpretation.

In one episode Dre wants to purchase a gun. When he visits a gun shop the woman in line before him—an old Asian woman—purchases a shotgun over the counter. When Dre tries to buy a hand-gun, however, he is shocked to hear there is ten-day waiting period and he must pass a test, because—"well," the vendor begins, "hand-guns are dangerous."[5] Meanwhile, the woman from before is trying to load her shotgun in the background, apparently less concerning for the manager than Dre having a hand-gun. Black viewers will understand this scene as a micro-aggression, a slight perceived by the victim as an attack on his or her minority identity; much of the black community faces moments such as this daily. It is unclear to what extent Dre is being targeted for his race, if at all, but he is noticeably uncomfortable when addressing the situation. Dre could have called out the gun dealer for being racially biased, but without explicit proof such a response may simply be overly sensitive.

Since racial discrimination has become much more subtle, this is how many people now are navigating the issue, using snap-judgement to evaluate whether or not the feeling of being slighted falls upon the perpetrator's bias or the victim's sensitivity. One cannot deny that Dre's behavior is often very problematic, perpetuating many racial stereotypes, but that does not make

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[5] Dre's white boss also purchased a gun from this shop over the counter without a problem, and actually recommended Dre go to the same shop to avoid the waiting-period.

his experience any less real or important to a black audience. Simultaneously the scene is not unintelligible to a white audience, thus *Black-ish* accurately and understandably conveys racial discrimination from the black perspective to white audiences. Therefore the show encourages white viewers both to challenge their racial stereotypes and acknowledge black success as a reality that is not mutually exclusive with racial oppression.

Black viewers evaluate these shows' representations of themselves in two main ways. In one, black audiences consider how a representation may effect the black community exclusively, i.e. the Huxtables are perfect thus good role models for the black community. In the other, black audiences consider how the same representation may shape the thinking of white audiences, who through oppressive institutional control hold considerable power over black lives, i.e. the Huxtables are perfect, therefore they allow whites to argue that blacks don't face discrimination.

While the African-Americans interviewed for Inniss' study all agreed that black people should be able to find positive representations of themselves, this stipulation seemed superseded by an alternative necessity to reframe white-opinion of the black community, evoking a "double-consciousness" (Du Bois, 3). While we want positive role models and images of ourselves, we also do not want America to forget that many of us are not as fortunate as the Huxtables. The challenge for *Black-ish*, and the future of progressive black television and media, will be opposing notions of authentic blackness without completely dismissing them, because it is a reality that many of us are living "authentically" black lives.

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