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Racializing Sexuality:

Voicing the Forced Silence of Young Black Queers on TV

The first time I did not know I was queer was when I was watching *Space Jam* (1996). I had already had a long-standing crush on Bugs Bunny, but then Lola Bunny came out onto the basketball court and something inside me said, “CeCe, maybe you should think about coming out too.” (Of course, at that age -- which was probably four or five -- I had no concept of “coming out.”) The second time I did not know I was queer was when I saw the music video for Beyoncé’s “Baby Boy.” That video was *way* too sexy and baby CeCe did *not* know what to do with herself. The third time I did not know I was queer was when I was playing *The Sims* and I realized I could make my female sims kiss. Then I thought, forget kissing -- let’s make them woohoo! (Woohoo means have sex.) I was sad because I could not make them try for a baby. I thought the game was being sexist, but then I later realized it was just pure biology. The fourth time I did not know I was queer was when I was playing on a website called *Club Penguin*. My friend caught me dressing my avatar as a boy and said, “CeCe, that’s strange.” On the outside, I shrugged it off and said, “Well, Olivia, your face is strange.” But on the inside, I questioned myself. I went home and decided to figure out how “strange” I could be. I continued dressing my avatar like a boy and started flirting with other girls online, and they *loved* it. I had multiple girlfriends on *Club Penguin*, and they are still the only girlfriends I have had to this day. Because

the fifth time I did not know I was queer was when I watched *Glee* (2009-2015), a show praised for its diversity of race and sexual orientation, and saw myself reflected in nothing.

Having grown up in the age of New Media, I was practically raised by TV. It provided me with comfort and guidance, while also helping me improve my reading and use of different social cues. Some may argue that TV has become obsolete in the past few years. However, thanks to streaming capabilities and network subscriptions, TV shows are more readily available to be consumed on a regular basis. Therefore, they continue to hold influence over our daily lives and perceptions of reality despite the growth of other forms of media. For example, the relatively recent increase in gay representation on TV mirrors the ongoing mainstreaming of homosexuality. However, on-screen gay characters usually portray a “homonormative” queerness -- an idealized form of queerness that abides by and upholds the dominance of white heteronormativity (Kohnen 28). These depictions subordinate and denigrate the diverse arrays of queer lifestyles, especially for black queers. In addition to the unjust amount of cruelty black queers face as racial and sexual minorities, their voices have been silenced and eclipsed by the white majority. TV may have broadened its diversity of sexual orientation, but that “progress” has only furthered racial disparities within the LGBTQ+ community. On-screen characters became some of my biggest role models; yet, as I got older, I realized that those characters did not share my experiences as a black queer/questioning youth. I realized that, according to TV, people like me had no value in society. As a platform that creates a visceral experience and understanding of oneself and others, the increasing prevalence of white queer representation on TV juxtaposed with the limited amount of black queer visibility reflects and perpetuates the assumed otherness of queer people of color.

TV has always been an influential resource in our lives, and its role as a tool of socialization has only increased over time. “Because, by definition, numerical minorities are not as visible in the social spheres of the dominant culture, pop culture productions often function as substitutes for actual encounters between individuals” (Moore 203). In other words, the effect TV has on our cognitive frameworks shapes how we perceive and interact with those who are different than us. This idea is supported by cultivation theory, which suggests that people understand media portrayals to be a true reflection of reality (Fisher et al.). Consequently, a lack of minority representation is often translated to a lack of relevance, especially in the minds of teenage youth, who are more impressionable. The concept of cultivation theory is particularly pressing on perceptions of queer people, as TV has always had a definitive impact on the understanding of queer identities (Kohnen 31). With shows like *Ellen* (1994) and the first iteration of *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), the so-called “Gay 90s” sparked a surge in the visibility of gay people on television (Kohnen 151) that both matches and progresses the burgeoning acceptance of gay lifestyles. That increasing exposure, that time spent getting to know gay characters over multiple televisual seasons, allows viewers the time to forge real, empathetic connections with said characters. These relationships can cause viewers to be more tolerant of the LGBTQ+ community, as displayed by the fact that there is an increased likelihood of heterosexuals supporting gay rights if they have personal connections to gay people (Lehman 88). Therefore, queer representation on TV is not only a political socialization agent, but an agent that opens the minds and hearts of its viewers to a world of acceptance and understanding.

However, that understanding is often misconstrued and lost in the monolithic portrayals of queer characters. Although TV has made strides in regards to queer visibility, “the breadth of

queer representation actually diminished” (Kohnen 151). According to media and society, stereotypically white, homonormative gay people are the *only* ones worthy of representation and the validation that accompanies it. And yet, it was people of color and questions of race that were the catalysts of groundbreaking moments in the LGBTQ+ rights movement (e.g. the Stonewall Riots, earning the right to serve in the military.) This queer history has been erased because scholars prefer to interact with white bodies, which can “be read as blank slates, not already overdetermined by race” (Kohnen 17). Whiteness is not only the absence of color, but the absence of complication, the absence of struggle. Whiteness is the spoonful of sugar that makes queerness easier to swallow because it conforms to the white, heteronormative majority. In terms of TV representation, this concept of filtering out otherness to isolate queerness from other intersectional identities is referred to as the “closet-as-screen.” “Much like the epistemology of the closet regulates knowledge of (queer) sexuality, the closet-as-screen regulates which types of queerness becomes visible in the media and which ones remain invisible (or at least harder to see)” (Kohnen 12). And more often than not, black queers are the ones who remain invisible, the ones who are filtered out and left behind.

Even shows that have been acclaimed for their queer representation lack fulfilling depictions of queer people of color. Fox’s hit teen musical series *Glee* (2009-2015) is well known for its trailblazing portrayals of gay characters. Unlike preceding series, *Glee*’s queer characters have depth and longevity, facing issues that gay adolescents are likely to encounter in their lives. Gay youth can find a system of support in these characters that they may not find elsewhere. In fact, fans of the show have credited *Glee* for not only giving them the courage to come out, but the drive to seek help. The Trevor Project hotline, a suicide hotline for queer

youth, reports “many callers making references to the series” (Lehman 88). These oftentimes life-changing, and sometimes even life-saving benefits of representation are not offered to gay people of color. Instead of saving the lives of black queers, *Glee* participates in their symbolic annihilation, the process of “keeping sexual minorities invisible and without power” (Fischer et al.). While there are queer people of color featured on *Glee*, their storylines pale in comparison to the homonormative white, gay males Kurt and Blaine. Kurt and Blaine’s relationship is fully disclosed, but a romantic relationship is nowhere to be found for the black transgender character Unique. Ryan Murphy, the director of *Glee*, claims that the queer visibility on his show “conveys a message: ‘I think what it says to a lot of young gay people who are confused and ashamed is that you can get love and are worthy of love’” (Lehman 97). The keywords Murphy uses are “a lot,” which, in this case, reads as an exclusionary term. It implies that there are those whom *Glee* leaves feeling incapable and unworthy, and it is the ones whose televisual counterparts go unloved: black queers.

As a people who have faced oppression on all fronts since the beginning of their existence, black queer Americans are consistently ignored or willfully forgotten. When they *are* remembered by mainstream society, it is either at their expense or for the benefit of white heteronormativity. Despite being a show that is supposedly sympathetic to the plight of all LGBTQ+ people, during its first two seasons, *Glee* was criticized for its insensitivity to transgender issues (Lehman 100). Neither the show’s writers nor its directors apologized for the use of transphobic slurs and insults, but they did create the highly diverse character Unique. Similar to the problematic trope of white people using their black friends as an excuse to get away with racism, *Glee* introduces Unique as the black transgender character as an attempt to

cover up past discrimination. Rather than giving her the same respect as its white gay characters, *Glee* takes advantage of her minority identities, offering them as an olive branch to its viewers while also devaluing her to nothing but an othered thing. Unique came onto *Glee* with a handful of other new characters with the anticipation of replacing the original ones. Instead of creating new storylines, writers of the show essentially made diluted versions of the original characters. While the other members of the original cast each had their own replacement, the white heteronormative faces of diversification -- the loud-mouthed black girl and the feminine white gay guy -- were shoved together to create Unique, a black transgender woman. *Glee* did not even take the time to continue to give cultural outsiders low-grade, individual representation. And, to be frank, it would not have been that hard to write in two replacement characters considering both are cookie-cutter stereotypes that have been continuously recycled since media started to become more “diverse.”

Despite this blatant disrespect shown toward racial and sexual minorities, I was excited to finally see black queer representation on TV aimed at people my age. *Glee* was one of my favorite shows during my teenage years, and it hurt to not have a character with whom I could fully identify. However, even after the inclusion of Unique, I continued to be let down. The intersectionality of Unique’s identities seem to carry the weight of too much “otherness” for *Glee* to hold all at once. Unique is black and queer, but she is rarely portrayed as a black queer. In the 1800s “when queerness became ‘the love that dare not speak its name,’ race became a constitutive factor of queerness that is often unnamed” (Kohnen 17); and if *Glee* is any intimation, nothing has changed. The show’s best attempt to unite queerness and blackness was to title the episode in which Unique encounters transphobia in gendered bathrooms “The End of

the Twerk.” The gravity of the trauma Unique suffers as a result of her sexual orientation is overshadowed by the perpetuation of racial stereotypes. In this sense, not only is Unique the token black character, she is the token transgender character. *Glee* uses her sexual identity as a platform to address serious issues in one scene, then makes a joke of her racial identity in the next. That is the full extent of her character. Viewers do not get to know her as anything more than the bullied transgender kid or the sassy black kid who is nothing but a punchline. “Recent scholarship attests to the importance of queer representations in building viewers’ self-esteem” (Lehman 88); and if characters like Unique are the only role models for myself and other black queer youth, how will we ever feel comfortable with who we are? How will we ever learn to love ourselves when mainstream society continues to symbolically annihilate our existence?

The fact that *Glee* is highly regarded for its queer representation, despite its treatment of queer people of color, is disappointing evidence that no true progress in the diversification of sexual orientation on TV has been made. Yes, *Glee* features two queer characters of color. Yes, it is the first prime-time network show to tell the story of a LGBTQ+ teen of color (Lehman 93). But society should not applaud a show for giving a voice to queer people when the voices of queer people of color are kept below a whisper. The only reason *Glee*’s unprecedented storyline exists is because fans of the show *begged* for a lesbian relationship. Actress Naya Rivera who played Santana, a Latina lesbian, credits fans for “Santana’s transformation: ‘Who knows if the writers would have taken that relationship so seriously if there hadn’t been such an outpouring for [Santana and Brittany] to get together’” (Lehman 92). Viewers had to demand representation, displaying *Glee*’s tendency to overlook queer people of color. Before coming out, Santana engages in sexual activity with her best friend Brittany. However, when the two enter an

exclusive homosexual relationship, their physical romance receives no screen time. “Brittany and Santana are able to display their relationship so long as they are explicitly heterosexual” (Clarke 136). In order to be herself and love who she wants, Santana has to claim an identity that fits within the confines of heteronormativity. When she breaks those bounds and openly identifies as a lesbian, she is unable to fully express her love because she has to conform to homonormativity. Either way, *Glee*’s writers communicate to viewers that there is no place in society for lesbians of color to live freely. Instead of encouraging queer people of color to fight for themselves and their right to love and be loved, *Glee* does nothing but tell them to give up.

If a critically acclaimed show like *Glee* cannot even spare two seconds to display an interracial romance between a white woman and a Latina woman, can we ever expect to see any authentic, young black queer love on TV? Surprisingly, the answer is yes. *Glee* may have been the first show to feature teenage queer people of color as a means of exploiting their minority identities, but it is not alone in silencing the voices of queer people of color. One of the five main characters of ABC Family’s (now Freeform) hit thriller series *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017) is the lesbian Emily, portrayed by Filipina actress Shay Mitchell. About halfway through the first season, Emily begins a relationship with Maya, portrayed by black actress Bianca Lawson. Unlike *Glee*, *Pretty Little Liars* does devote time to its lesbian relationship, allowing Emily and Maya to fully explore their feelings for each other and fall in love over the course of the season. But that one season is essentially all viewers are given, as if to say that black queer love is a fleeting possibility. Instead of giving the budding love between Emily and Maya the chance to develop, Maya is written off the show by way of a drug addiction that sends her to rehab. The show’s writers use the uninspired, stereotypical criminalization of blackness as a barrier to

Maya's ability to express her sexuality, suggesting that blackness impedes queer love. In the next season, Maya returns to the show, and just as her relationship with Emily begins to resurface, she mysteriously disappears. It is later revealed that her ex-boyfriend, who happens to be black, murdered her because she left him for Emily. In this sense, *Pretty Little Liars* falls short of *Glee* in its queer representation. *Glee* symbolically annihilates black queers, but *Pretty Little Liars* goes out of its way to weaponize blackness and literally kill its only black queer character, essentially punishing her for trying to exceed the bounds of homonormativity. Emily and Maya's tragic relationship conveys that blackness is a destructive force that stands in fatal opposition to queerness.

TV may present exaggerations of societal beliefs, but that does not mean there is not any truth to its portrayals. At home, my parents outwardly expressed their shame and disgust toward homosexuality, going so far as to actively punish my brother for being gay. At youth group, my pastor preached about the "abomination of homosexuality," heavily insinuating that queerness is a damning and unforgivable sin. At school, my friends made fun of LGBTQ+ people, and some even believed that gay people have the devil in their souls. Growing up in an environment in which queerness was condescended, unwanted, and even demonized, I never had the chance to openly explore my sexuality; I was born straight and that was the end of it. Except I was *not* born straight. I was born queer. But nobody, not even myself, could see that because of our willful ignorance. We could not see my queerness because media platforms such as TV enable ignorance and refuse to portray authentic black queerness. TV refuses to allow the voices of black queer people to be heard.

My research on black queer visibility, and therefore my claim, may not extend further than *Glee* and *Pretty Little Liars*, but that is because black queer representation of people my age (late teens - early 20s) does not extend further than those two shows. There is little black queer representation on TV, therefore there is little research to be done on the topic. The struggles and limitations I faced in pursuing my research, are reflective of the struggles and limitations I face as a young, black, queer woman: I am struggling to fully accept and express my identities because I know that I am limited by them. My black queerness others me from society, my friends, my church, my home. My black queerness makes me unworthy and unloved. My black queerness is nothing but an apology, a joke, a character to be eliminated without thought. My black queerness is a death sentence. But white queerness is celebrated and praised. At least that is what TV and society tell me.

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