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BLACK SITCOMS
A BLACK PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

A lot has been written about the portrayal of blacks in the American media, especially the negative stereotypical portrayals that have come out of Hollywood. Black situation comedies, the majority of which are produced and aired by "mainstream" white American media, have born the brunt of the anger and criticism of many black activists and civil rights groups. Dating back to the days of CBS's *Amos and Andy*, black sitcoms on the whole have not represented African Americans positively. But most of the articles on black sitcoms have been based on "mainstream" views and critiques, principally seeking to show that the majority of black sitcoms are distasteful to whites because they are loaded with "black in-jokes" and other racial references. Little commentary about the actual effects of black sitcoms on their major (intended) black audiences in America has made it to print. Little systematic or empirical research has been undertaken to find out more about the way average black Americans perceive black sitcoms. This observation has been the impetus for the much-needed analytical overview provided in this essay, which means to give a voice to the often neglected ordinary African American audiences of black sitcoms. The paper employs what Hill Collins (1990), hooks (1984) and other African American feminists characterize as standpoint, a view that is based on the actual experiences of the people under study, excluding the perceptions of other groups who do not share similar experiences. Additionally, the essay hopes to open more doors for similar conversations and analyses of other cultural products linked to minority population groups. Discussing the responses of black audiences, the study employs an analytical framework that examines the intersections of race, nation, class and gender in the American black family—as portrayed in black sitcoms.

Sources of information

The data used in this paper were collected from the responses of black TV viewers who watch black sitcoms to open-ended questions. The participants live in South Carolina, a southeastern state, which is known to be still quite overtly racist. Therefore, although the responses to the same questions would no doubt have been rather similar in other parts of the United States, this paper reflects the views of specific black viewers whose everyday experiences are shaped by South Carolinian social forces. The participants, whose real names have not been used in this paper, were asked to react to self-administered qualitative questions which sought their responses to their most favorite as well as least favorite black sitcoms. The questions were not accompanied by lists from which to choose or rank black sitcoms. Instead, the participants were asked to pick their own titles, loved or hated, based on their own criteria. Their responses were not tainted by predetermined categories and represent the authentic spontaneous voices of the participants, (See for example, Reinharz, 1992; Nielsen, 1990 for a discussion of similar feminist research issues).

Again, it should be noted that the responses discussed in this paper are not meant to be representative of all black audiences in the U.S., notably in terms of education. The respondents have all had some college education and their ages range from eighteen to fifty-five. There are a variety of black family types, which include single-parent units, two-parent households, no-parent teams, extended family units, multi-family-members households, grand-parent-headed families and other-relative-headed families. These family types are not static; instead, they are mutable, dynamic and always recreating themselves in different ways.

Analytical framework

In an effort to shed light on the unique experiences of African American TV viewers as a social group, this paper follows what many social scientists—including several feminists—have adopted and advocated as an analytical framework: the intersections of race, class, gender and nationality. (For discussions on similar issues, see for example, Gaidzanwa, 1997; Mikell, 1997; Hill Collins, 1991; Narayan, 1997; hooks, 1984). The systems of race, nation, class, gender and sexual orientation are interwoven, interdependent and they intersect in various ways at various levels, including the macro, micro, familial and personal to influence the social experiences of individuals and groups [Weber, 2000]. In other words, we do not view a person in fragmented ways, we try not to form a disjointed picture of her/him, but opt for a holistic view

of a person, using all the aspects of the major categories of social classification. When we visualize black families, we do not indulge in simplistic caricatures, but think of complex sets. It is capital to regard the social factors as intersecting as opposed to viewing them as additive, because the systems operate in ways that influence each other, and they operate simultaneously, even though one system might be more salient than others, at any one time [Weber, 2000]. For example, during slavery in the U.S., blackness and whiteness, i.e. race, were the most prevalent factors, and they were the factors that determined the lives of the people and their relationships to each other more than any other factor. However, even within the same racial group, women and men had disparate power statuses, so did the rich and the poor; the latter was especially more significant within the white race. Similarly, before 1920, American white women did not have the right to vote. Yet, both white and black males could vote, despite the fact that blacks, as a racial group, were (and still are) hierarchically less powerful than whites. In this regard, gender, and not race (at least after 1865-66, when black males gained the right to vote) was the determining factor. Thus, race and gender, respectively, were the most salient systems in the historical eras above.

At this point, it is necessary to discuss how the factors intersect by providing some illuminating real life examples. In a South Carolinian suburban department store, for example, it is not unusual for the employees to be suspicious of, and to follow around certain types of shoppers who fit the stereotype of a "shoplifter." Generally, female shoppers are more likely to be suspected of intending to shoplift cosmetics than male shoppers. However, if we take two female shoppers, the woman of color is more likely to be watched than the white one, mainly because of the stereotypes, many of which come from media images, that seem to suggest that blacks are "criminally minded" (This even goes back to old schools of psychology such as Lombroso's). In such cases, race and gender are simultaneously working together to influence the experiences of the black female shopper. If we add the dimension of class to the equation, we find that a black female who is visibly lower-class or working-class will be more likely to be a target than a white middle-class or even lower-class female. If we add the dimension of nationality—let's say the black women in question is visibly an immigrant from some poor country, she will most likely be viewed with the utmost suspicion.

Although black family members in black sitcoms as well as in real life differ widely in the ways in which they interact with each other, depending on the environmental circumstances influencing them at any given time, their social experiences are generally shaped in significantly similar ways, by their group's status in the power hierarchy of the U.S. The notion of nation can be

further reduced to refer to the region of the nation in which the concerned population lives. In the U.S. there are significant regional differences that shape people's experiences, especially in terms of degree and type of racial discrimination people of color have to confront in their daily social interactions. In the southeast, for instance, as noted in the introduction, there still exists a significant amount of overt racism, as embodied by organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the so-called redneck defenders of the confederate flag. This does not imply that racism does not exist in similarly harmful ways in other parts of the country, nor does it suggest that every interracial social encounter is "racially charged."

Needless to say, black families are multifaceted units that are made up of dynamic and complex people; nevertheless, as a social group whose experiences are influenced by their common racial category and general status in the American economic and political power structure, they are bound to present many similarities.

Discussion of the responses of black viewers to black sitcoms

The top most favorite and least favorite sitcoms named in the study include those shown on mainstream large networks that are intended for a predominantly white audience, and those that are shown on smaller networks and are targeted at black audiences. Because the participants are not a homogeneous group, they present a variety of opinions; the sitcoms some of them cite as their most favorite are others' least favorite, giving some credence to the central theme of NBC's (1978-1985) and ABC's (1985-1986) *Different Strokes*, starring Gary Coleman. Nevertheless, there are overwhelming resemblances in the way the participants rated and critiqued the sitcoms. The perceptions that are presented below encompass a wide range of reactions and observations which should be interpreted holistically, within the contexts of the viewers' race, class, gender, and nation. But this analysis does not essentialize African American experiences (see, for example Spelman, 1988 for discussions on essentialism). To promote a deeper understanding of the issues discussed, the respondents' social status is given wherever possible.

It is important to note that sexuality, which is also a very central facet in determining any individual's social situation, is not featured significantly here, mainly due to the conspicuous absence of characters representing a diverse range of sexual preferences. Although the situation is improving, sexual minorities have not been very welcome in American TV shows. Ellen DeGeneres's show suffered a great deal simply because it featured overt homosexual content. The situation is worse for black sitcoms, where

homosexual characters are likely to be rejected by many viewers because of the strong stigmas that the African American community generally places on homosexuality (see, for example, Nicholson, 1997 for similar discussions). Therefore, although there are several male characters who display significant amounts of the type of mannerisms that are stereotypically associated with gay males, including being liberated enough to display emotions through traditionally "feminine" ways such as crying, there are no significant overt displays of homosexuality, as is the case in the white sitcom *Will and Grace*, for instance.

The most popular sitcoms

According to the study, the top most favorite black sitcoms are those that portray black families in positive realistic ways. In other words, the viewers evaluate sitcoms based on the way they can directly identify with the characters and the way those characters react to "real life" situations. Those sitcoms that portray familiar life experiences in a manner that the respondents believe to be "objective," "real," and "truthful" are rated as good sitcoms.

The top most favorite sitcom of the respondents is the old version of *The Cosby Show*, whose reruns are currently aired on the mainstream television network FOX. In spite of some of the well-known criticisms that have been leveled against the show, the participants felt that the show did a wonderful job of portraying functional black middle-class families. Most of the mainstream criticisms of the sitcom revolve around the claim that the show portrays a superficially perfect black family that does not exist. The major implied message of such comments is that black families are incapable of living in reasonable harmonious two-parent households where both parents are educated and financially sound. With that backdrop in mind, it becomes very significant that black audiences do not seem to perceive *The Cosby Show* as portraying a utopian kind of family at all. Lawanda, a twenty-five-year-old female accountant argues that "The racist media does not want people to know that there are black families who have good values and who love each other as family members, yet there are many such families in America, especially in large 'chocolate' cities like Chicago, Washington D.C., and Atlanta." Other participants claim that *The Cosby Show* does a very good job of portraying the type of black family that the "mainstream media would rather have us forget," in the words of Tameka, a thirty-five-year-old professor of mass communication studies.

The respondents predominantly comment on the positive portrayal of black families and on the importance of showing that African Americans are

capable of rising up the ladder of social mobility to a comfortable middle-class status; granted, these are only a few among black people who often suffer great poverty and discrimination in the U.S. For example, Shalonda, a forty-two-year-old female administrator says, "I think the show actually shows a wealthy African American family who worked hard and are well educated. This makes it the best show because it shows that not all blacks are the stereotypical lazy, poor and uneducated." Many black viewers feel that such series as *The Cosby Show* are crucial to the development of a black middle-class society, mainly because they provide young African Americans with excellent role models who inspire them to, in the words of Jamal, "complete their education and live professional lives." The comments of the participants simultaneously address the axes of race and class, shedding light on the way their experiences within the social hierarchy influence their perceptions of how race and class intersect in their country, shaping their lives. The viewers show a strong awareness of the urgent need to create a black middle class so as to improve the social status of African Americans.

The participants' second most favorite sitcom is *The Parkers*, which is currently aired on UPN at 8.00 P.M. on Mondays. The show revolves around the feisty mother-daughter relationship between Nikki (Mo'Nique) and Kim Parker (Countess Vaughn James) who attend the same college and are battling with issues of giving each other the independence that is required for mother and daughter to maintain a loving and reasonably harmonious relationship while allowing each of them to grow as dynamic individuals. The black viewers in the study cite the importance of portraying positive mother-daughter relationships, which many of them claim they have with their mothers and/or daughters. Sholondra, an eighteen-year-old college student, says "Me and my mom are so tight. We share practically everything. I tell her all about the guys I meet and she gives me good advice on every little problem I get. My mom is my best friend and I know I am her best friend, too. We talk like three times a day, even though the calls are long distance for us. So, Kim and her mom kind of remind me of myself and my own mom." Such sentiments are echoed by many of the other respondents, highlighting intersections of gender and race.

The participants also identify with the closeness of family relationships, a common phenomenon among blacks; this is quite unlike the usual portrayal of African Americans in the media. Additionally, this show is perceived as portraying the enormous strength and resilience of the single black female parent (Nikki), who, in this show, has overcome the problems associated with journeying toward personal and educational advancement for lower-middle-class black women. Nikki goes back to school as an adult

student and finds herself attending college with her teenage daughter. The participants appreciate this "accurate" portrayal of, according to Shameka, a black single mother who is attending continuing education classes at a university in the southeast of the United States, depicting "the strength of black women" who, for decades, have been very pivotal to the development of African American society. Several of the male respondents comment on the "truthful" portrayal of "strong black women," the type that most of them are searching for in a life companion, black women engaged in common and realistic struggles of upward social mobility.

The third most favorite sitcom that the participants cite is CBS's *Good Times* (1974-79). Most of them comment on their fondness of the depiction of poor yet "successful" black families. The sitcom, which is based on the lives of a very poor working-class family, the Evans, and their equally poor friends and neighbors, portrays some of the major trials and tribulations of African Americans in this class. Some of the "real life" type ordeals the sitcom family has had to endure include being severely cash-stripped, being nearly thrown out of their home, being compelled to send their young children off to work menial low-paying jobs, and frequently being unable to keep food on the table. Because of the "reality" of the sitcom, many of the participants admit that *Good Times* often reminds them of periods in their lives when their families have been on the verge of acute poverty or in practical bankruptcy situations. The viewers admire the way the show "features episodes of how families have their good days and how they make the best out of a bad situation," in Jibri's words. Therefore, they enjoy those shows, which in their opinion realistically present race and class issues.

Another choice sitcom for the participants in the study is ABC's *My Wife and Kids*, which is based on the family interactions of the Kaye family. The participants feel that the sitcom, about a strong but realistically challenging husband and wife partnership, is a good representation of the "modern young black family living in the city," as Shakenya, a twenty-five-year-old married woman, puts it. According to Shavonnah, a second-year college student, the audience likes "the way the Kayes discipline their children and the way they treat them." Respondents also say that they enjoy the way the characters, especially those played by Damon Wayans and Tisha Campbell, "combine comical situations with real life problems," to quote Charles, a forty-five-year-old substitute teacher. In other words, the viewers admire sitcoms that attempt to make challenging life situations appear lighter, more manageable and less depressing by satirizing them and making them look so comical that the viewers cannot help but laugh—at themselves. *My Wife and*

Kids constantly addresses the way race and gender interplay in shaping the experiences of a black lower-middle-class family.

Girlfriends, which some critics have called the black equivalent of *Sex and the City*, is quite popular with the black TV viewers in the study. Most of them cite the show's take on professional black women as a very attractive feature, given the predominantly negative stereotypical images of black women in the media as "loud and aggressive," according to Mike, a male professor in media studies. Additionally, the viewers perceive the sitcom as an accurate representation of a variety of intimate relationships, interracial, sexual, sentimental, casual and serious. Helene, a highly educated single woman who is on the dating scene herself, admits to experiencing many of the dating headaches that Ross and her girlfriends endure and enjoy. "It is a mad world out there for single professional black women," Helene comments. Therefore, the intimate relationship quagmires in *Girlfriends*, especially those experienced by Joan (Tracee Ellis Ross), are not too far-fetched.

Also not uncommon are male behaviors portrayed in *Girlfriends*, such as blaming their relationship problems on "the craziness of women," especially those who are having "monthly menstrual periods." Respondents also say that they can identify with the unfair demands that relationships place on black women, who often feel that they must sacrifice their own interests in order to "please and keep [their] hard-to-get good black men." *Girlfriends* offers "real relationship issues" that audiences identify with, says Linda, a forty-five-year-old college educated secretary. Further, many of the female participants appreciate the "feminist comments" that the show conveys on traditional institutions such as marriage, which has been characterized as an oppressive institution for women, for instance.

There are two other sitcoms that are quite popular with the respondents. First, *Moesha*, a FOX television show, which features a teenager, Moesha (Brandy), who is outspoken and quite intelligent and goal-oriented. Most of the participants say that they identify with what they see as a realistic portrayal of the generational wars that are typical of father-teenage daughter relationships. In such situations, the interplay between gender, age and parental status as they relate to the black family are significant. Second, UPN's *One on One* which is primarily based on the interactions between a single father and his teenage daughter. The participants love *One on One*'s positive representation of the otherwise "highly criminalized" black male, who is stereotypically viewed as a "dead-beat dad." Granted, "there are a good number of black men who are totally irresponsible; however, aren't there a lot of such white males, too? So, it is very refreshing to watch the successful struggles of a professional and responsible single black man on television," says Pamela, a

twenty-one-year-old third-year college English major. In conclusion, many of the viewers are fond of sitcoms that portray black men in active and positive parental roles; conversely, they are appalled by those sitcoms that reinforce negative stereotypes of black males—an endangered species, given the rampant arrests, imprisonments and murders that occur to this group in the United States of America.

The least popular sitcoms

Just as the black viewers in the study designate several black sitcoms as their favorites, they name some of their least favorite black sitcoms. As is the case with favorite sitcoms, black viewers express varied reasons for disliking certain sitcoms. The major ones have to do with what they perceive as negative portrayals of black families. They argue that the stereotypical representations of black families as dysfunctional, living chaotic lives, are distasteful and racist in nature. Respondents also dislike those sitcoms that present what they see as unrealistic images of black families, including those who are, in the words of Mercy, a twenty-year-old mass communications major, "extremely rich, with limitless flows of money, and leading the type of life one would expect from millionaires, of whom we do not have enough African Americans to warrant a full sitcom." Along the same vein, Nayasha, another second-year mass communication student says that an authentic sitcom picture of the black family in America ought to include some episodes when some characters encounter some financial struggles of some sort.

The most disliked sitcom is UPN's *The Hughleys,* which, unlike other sitcoms, does not at all feature on any of the participants' most favorite sitcom list. The major criticisms leveled against the show pertain to the "over-exaggeration of racially loaded issues," according to Tamara, a thirty-six-year-old professor of sociology. Black viewers feel that the show is "about trivial things, a show about nothing real," says Tracy, a twenty-year-old third-year college student. "It does not portray the actuality of typical black families, like them surviving poverty, for example," comments Katrina, a twenty-nine-year-old single mother and female secretary. Participants resent *The Hughleys*, thinking it falsely and/or negatively represents black families, which are portrayed "as disorganized and confused, which is a misrepresentation," according to Shawn, a married twenty-nine-year-old restaurant manager.

Commenting on the sitcom's representations of the professional black person, Lovanna, a thirty-five-year-old security officer and married mother of two thinks that *The Hughleys* "portrays a successful black man, who, unfortunately, has a terrible attitude especially about his job. He constantly curses

and 'downs' his job." Along similar lines, Gregg, a nineteen-year-old single business studies student says that he does not like the way Hughley behaves while performing his "important legal job of defending black people. In one episode, he continuously made racial jokes in court, which is very unprofessional and sad, on his part. It makes viewers think that black professional are incompetent." Such negative representations reinforce the predominant stereotype that black professionals are in positions that are allocated to them thanks to an affirmative action based quota system. Because of how sensitive most politically aware African Americans are to the issue of discrimination, it is not unexpected that shows that seem to reinforce predominant stereotypes about them are found to be very distasteful. Such comments underscore the importance of accurately showing how race, class and gender simultaneously operate in shaping the experiences of black professionals, who are already operating in such hostile corporate work environments that very few of them would put such rare opportunities to waste the way Hughley does.

Cedric, a thirty-four-year-old counselor feels that "The characters are always happy, and perky in all the episodes; that is not realistic. It is far from real. Everyone's family has problems." Participants contrasted *The Hughleys* with "more realistic" series such as *The Cosby Show* (which shows both happy and unhappy family moments, albeit in a positive manner), *Family Matters* and *Good Times*, which portray balanced views of family life. They argue that all families have their "good and bad days;" therefore, sitcoms that "pretend that everyday is like Christmas in the African American family [are] merely mocking us," says Mike. Given the hardships linked to the intersections of race, class and gender that are rampant in black America, it is not surprising that participants are scornful of shows whose writers seem to view the predominantly tough black world through rosy glasses. They prefer more accurate portrayals of the struggles that characterize the everyday experiences of most black people operating within the grossly unfairly distributed power structures of the United States, which generally award unfair privileges to white middle-class males, as a group [Weber, 2000; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984; Tong, 1998].

Black viewers detest unrealistically happy representations of black families, they also detest those sitcoms that portray black families as totally dysfunctional, negative, and perpetually fighting. They argue that reinforcing such negative stereotypes about African Americans is detrimental to the development of their community, whose members treat each other with "the respect taught to us by our ancestors and our grandparents who had traditional family values," in the words of Kelvin, a thirty-six-year-old entrepreneur. According to the results of the study, one such show is FOX's *The Bernie Mac*

Show. The series is about the "crazy" family life of a man who looks after his sister's children, "a common notion among black families," in the words of Danica, a forty-nine-year-old grandmother of two. While some participants like nineteen-year-old Dameon enjoy *The Bernie Mac Show*, commenting on the manner in which the main character, Bernie Mac, frequently "interrupts the flow of events to share his thoughts and intentions with the audiences," many of the participants severely criticize the content of the show.

Black viewers abhor the way Bernie Mac "always scolds and abuses his sister's kids," says Monique, a twenty-five-year-old single mother of one and aunt to numerous nieces and nephews. The respondents comment on how common it is for black families to look after their relatives' children and other members of the extended family. This observation is supported by many black social anthropologists, including Adu Febiri (1995) who says that many black societies are characterized by their philosophy and practice of collectivism, whereby they make it their duty to assist members of the extended family and expect help from relatives (in Chivaura & Mararike, 1998).

The participants say that they resent shows that make viewers think "blacks discipline their children in harsh and sometimes inhumane ways. Especially with the negative coverage that Michael Jackson's father has been getting these days, Bernie Mac is truly doing us great injustices," says Paula, a twenty-nine-year-old instructor of physical education. Because of the *de facto* segregation that operates in the U.S., it is not uncommon for many whites to grow up to adulthood without ever engaging in any meaningful conversation with a black person. Therefore, it is quite possible that many of the white audiences of black sitcoms base their major—if not sole—perceptions of black people on the representations they see on television. Naturally, although black viewers often feel strongly about sitcoms that misrepresent them and reinforce existing prejudices, they are not devoid of a sense of humor, and enjoy some satirical shows, such as *My Wife and Kids.*

Conclusion

Just as whites in the U.S. have enjoyed watching "themselves" in TV sitcoms for decades, blacks now have more and more opportunities to do the same, albeit on a much smaller scale. The discussion above has shown that what black viewers (at least the respondents) appreciate most about black sitcoms is watching "ordinary events" in black communities portrayed in comical ways on television. They enjoy watching people who look like them battling through the trials and tribulations of African American life in the ghetto, in the workplace, in the home, in grand-mamma's kitchen, in the corporate

world, in public institutions such as universities and hospitals, and on the streets of big cities. In other words, they favor some black sitcoms because they can identify with the characters, the themes, stories, jokes, and with the cultural aspects that are covered thereon. Therefore, black sitcoms contribute toward building what postmodernists such as Cornel West are committed to foster in black folks—identity politics (see, for example, Steigerwald, 1995, for more discussion on black postmodernism).

In particular, they appreciate the positive portrayal of the various types of strength among different characters, who successfully and even humorously negotiate the adverse conditions that the majority of ordinary African Americans confront in their daily lives. Furthermore, they value sitcoms that depict black people as diverse, complex and sophisticated, as opposed to those that show them as simplistic and one-dimensional. The respondents in the study express their reverence for producers of sitcoms that celebrate the "different strokes" that characterize African Americans. They enjoy sitcoms with "regular" human beings who tackle individual, familial, social, financial, sentimental and medical challenges that other people from other population groups also face. They like non-essentialized representations of African American families.

On the other hand, the respondents express disgust at those sitcoms that seem to be too preoccupied with "superficial" topics, including sex, dating, and other aspects that have been stereotypically ascribed to the "highly sexed" black American. Dating back to the slavery and lynching era, black people have been described as having sexual appetites that are insatiable and uncontrollable. The participants do not appreciate those sitcoms that provide skewed and myopic views of African Americans. Such stereotypical images show "how white supremacy has imposed distorted self-images on a group of people reduced to the Other" [Steigerwald, 1995]. The respondents in the study also reject sitcoms whose characters are generally static and always naïve; this is the common interpretation of black people that many prejudiced white Americans have and have seen in several television shows over the past decades.

Based on the results of this study, the success of the black sitcom among blacks is determined by how well it balances a positive *and* realistic portrayal of blacks. Gone are the days when black viewers would tolerate being negatively caricatured on television shows. The successful black sitcom of the future, taking into account the way race, class, gender and nation intersect to shape the lives of black families, has to take into consideration the fact that blacks, like all other complex human beings, need to be portrayed holistically

as dynamic, intelligent and progressive people, without essentializing black experiences.

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