Deconstruction of stereotypical images and mediated messages in African-American sitcoms

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ABSTRACT

AFRICANA WOMEN'S STUDIES

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B.A. HAMPTON UNIVERSITY, 1997

DECONSTRUCTION OF STEREOTYPES AND MEDIATED MESSAGES IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN SITCOMS

Advisor: Dr. Josephine Bradley

Thesis dated May, 2002

This study examines the images of African Americans in black-themed sitcoms and mediated messages presented here. The study was based on the premise that the images of African Americans on television sitcoms are one dimensional and comedic.

A content analysis approach was used to analyze various television sitcoms. Definitions were used to determine what type of image existed using the foundation provided by Donald Bogle and Stewart Hall.

The researcher found that although many of the African-American-themed sitcoms investigated represented traditional stereotypical images, there were mediated messages in these sitcoms, which offered a new and different perspective on African Americans. This suggests that African-American images on black-themed sitcoms are moving forward.

Additionally, the researcher found that sitcoms depicting African-American life from a comedic point-of-view seem to be more acceptable in popular culture than those which depict life from a dramatic and/or realistic point-of-view.
DECONSTRUCTION OF STEREOTYPICAL IMAGES AND MEDIATED MESSAGES IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN SITCOMS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
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DEPARTMENT OF AFRICANA WOMEN'S STUDIES

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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</th>
<th>ii.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>v.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Mediated Messages</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Media Images</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Significance of Research</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Organization of the Remainder of the Thesis</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Definitions of Terms</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Stereotypical Images</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Minstrelsy and the Significance of Blackface</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Jim Crow and African Americans</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Early Images in Black Cinema</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Black Images and Television</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. FINDINGS (What You See Is What You Get)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Sitcoms Selected for Analysis</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Number of Episodes Reviewed in Selected Sitcoms</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Stereotypes Found in Episodes of Selected Sitcoms</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Family Orientation</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Main Character Occupation In Selected Sitcoms</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Resident Location of Selected Sitcoms</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"If I am not who you say I am, then you are not who you think you are."

-James Baldwin

This research is designed to examine the stereotypes and mediated messages of African-American men and women in television sitcoms. Who would have guessed that with the advent of television in 1939, that it would be a continuation of the same business for black America? The aftermath of the introduction of television should not have come as a surprise. After all, African Americans had been portrayed in earlier films and on radio in stereotypical roles identified as "Mammy," "Jezebel," "Coon," and "Tragic Mulatto." So for African Americans it was business as usual. However, these images did not set well with everyone as Oscar Micheaux and others attempted to correct what had been presented as the black image in films that offered another gaze for both the white and black audience. These earlier films proved unsuccessful in changing that image—that white gaze.

From the very beginning, however, African Americans have had a love affair for television. According to the Nielsen survey in 1990 and more recently, African Americans watch television more than any other group of people in America. Blacks
watch on the average, according to Nielsen, 70 hours of television while none-white
groups watch an average of 47 hours per week. Many reasons exist for this bewitching
affair: the faces on shows, such as Amos and Andy, unlike the radio predecessor of white
men with black voices, now had a black cast; African Americans such as Nat King Cole
hosted his own variety show; black women, even though in domestic roles starred in
shows with the show named after the black character, such as Beulah. Further, Beulah
now on television is a black woman and not a white man speaking with his interpretation
of a black woman’s voice as it had been on radio. Or was it the fact that provided some
level of black history, black consciousness, and black hope for a better piece of the
American dream? Even with the National Association of Colored People’s protest and
that of some blacks, which led to the network’s removal of the Amos and Andy Show, the
gaze had been initiated and the model set for future dominant black portrayal on
television. Against this backdrop, the American gaze for blackness on television had
been determined and presented for all to see and supposedly enjoy.

Thus, an interesting question emerges—what is it about the black image that so
intrigues white America that even in this century as in the past, it must be imitated,
ridiculed, and preserved? Is it the ability of blacks to laugh at themselves or the freedom
with which they manage to enjoy life regardless of circumstances? Perhaps, a
misconception of African Americans has been used as a tool to imitate black culture.
What Hollywood misunderstands about African Americans is the power of the rhythm of
living—the ability to make a way out of no way that intrigues the white audience and
producers, hence making it necessary to try to harness while controlling the black mind—
the black ability to transcend the prejudice and racism— even if just for a moment. Or is
the situation as McWhorter proposes: 'there were not many choices available to blacks; and the magnitude of the obstacles that were placed before them would have made the cultivation of perpetual rage a self-destructive mistake.' While from the 1940s to the 1950s, blacks were not in abundance on the television screen, they did show up in occasional shows, as guests on variety shows, such as The Ed Sullivan Hour, and briefly as supporting actors/actresses in predominantly white shows. John McWhorter, a black scholar, sees the history of African Americans on television as a "clear sign that the color line is ever dissolving in America." The introduction in 1968 of the Julia show only created a continuing battle over what was the standard black portrayal for a sitcom. Critics, including blacks, saw the show as inauthentic—or as McWhorter states, 'that even if the show was undeniably amusing, this parody on black reality was one of the only depictions of blacks on television.' Further, McWhorter argues, critics objected to the show:

For neglecting the tragedies of blacks in the inner cities. The Black power movement was just then forging a new sense of a "black identity" opposed to the mainstream one, which promoted the suffering poor blacks—the blacks most unlike middle-class whites—as the "real" blacks. For this radical (but increasingly pervasive) view, middle-class blacks had some explaining to do. They had deserted their "roots."  

Both McWhorter and Donald Bogle (the authority on blacks in the media) view the relationship between blacks and television in extremes. Bogle sees the relationship as based on the roles of toms, coons, mammys and mulattos, while McWhorter sees the

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2 Ibid.
relationship as one of race progress. However, neither entirely addresses the issue that African Americans needed to work, and wanted to work at their craft. Nor do they see that while, each views African Americans and the media from extremes, that without the willingness to work in radio and television, especially, progress would perhaps not be as inclusive as it is today.

Another issue which has confronted the critics is over what element of black life should be presented on television—what gaze should be prevalent. For one could argue that there are two gazes through which blacks and the media should be analyzed and critiqued—the white gaze and the black gaze. The white gaze works from a perspective of being in control of how blacks are presented and, therefore, how they are responded to by the dominant group. The black gaze works from the position of controlling what facet of black life is presented for the white gaze to incorporate into their repertoire of blackness. The black gaze has since the 1940s to 1960s where African Americans were so few and rare on television, encompassed the thrill of African Americans appearing that families treated those appearances as they did other accomplishments. Hence, in many situations, the thought was not necessarily on what the show was about, but the fact that a black face was present. Blacks related their gaze to the shows such as *Beulah* and *Amos and Andy* because they could relate not only to the characters, but also in many instances, to the circumstances or situations being presented. They were able to see the humor in the relationships between men and women because they were common to black life. They could appreciate the subtleties that the white gaze viewed one way, but which they could view and respond to as “getting one over on the master.” As in the history of black-white relationships, the black dance or song was interpreted as a sign of happiness.
at being enslaved, while for the performer it was a slap in the face to the white controller. Both groups prefer the gaze that says African Americans are ever suffering from poverty and inequality. Neither wins in the long run. Even in the 1960s when, according to Bogle the mission was to “tame the Negro,” that is, remove him from a threatening position, it did not meet its mission in totality.

In the 1980s until the present, television has been the medium for displaying the African-American family. Previously, the focus had been on sitcoms in which blacks could be portrayed as a clown, a criminal, shiftless, or a happy domestic. Presently, we see two parent families with issues of everyday living—education, economic stability, stay-at-home fathers or fathers who are taking an active role in the life of their children, families in which a couple becomes the adoptive parents of relatives or parent ad litem for children such as The Bernie Mac Show and The Fresh Prince of Bel Air. It is interesting that discussions of the presentation of black families see The Cosby Show as the premier example. Cosby, while reluctantly given a place on television by NBC, emerges as an acceptable commodity by both the black and white gaze. However, Julia, while representative of a single parent family, is condemned by critics and some African-American scholars as being unrealistic. Unfortunately, where positive images are presented many critics and viewers have chosen not to see them as realistic. While the early depictions of blacks as custodians, domestics, servants (for example, Rochester on The Jack Benny Show), clowns or buffoons or as “Sambos,” The Cosby Show, with professionals, Cliff and Claire Huxtable, helped to dispel old stereotypes and move the audience toward more realistic perceptions of Blacks.  

Crenshaw further comments that
the upper middle-class representation “altered the image of blacks as poor, downtrodden, yet happy-go-lucky clowns.” It appears that the show changed both the white gaze as well as the black gaze. For the white gaze, the Huxtables were more like them and thereby easy to accept—after all, assimilation and integration had worked; the family was seen as the exception to the rule of how African Americans lived. Also, gone were the moral portrayals of blacks as long suffering. On the other hand, for some African-Americans, it was difficult to identify with the Huxtables and their lifestyle was seen as “losing one’s roots.” Crenshaw mentions that material wealth as portrayed by the Huxtable family:

Coincided with Reagan’s “color-blind,” laissez-faire economic policies. [The show presented a] televised image of conservative thinking, demonstrating how success in America is available to all regardless of race and without the help of pesky government regulations like affirmative action. 4

Further, Crenshaw states, “Black sitcoms that failed to negotiate either end of this economic spectrum (presenting either a fantasy of privilege or stereotypical poverty) were met with lower ratings, and frequently cancellations.”

What it seems that both McWhorter and Bogle again miss is the notion of insult humor that has existed for black performers. “Insult humor,” according to Tobias Peterson, “in black sitcoms allows characters facing various forms of social disenfranchisement (both racist and economic driven) to assert themselves through snappy characterizations and comebacks. Implicit in this kind of interaction is aggressive, if playful, posturing, where it is every man, woman and in the case of The

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Bernie Mac Show, child, for himself/herself—nobody is immune from insult; nobody is above reproach. This insult humor is seen in such characters as Mr. Bookman, the maintenance man on Good Times, who is referred to as “Buffalo Butt” and Curtis and Re-Run of What’s Happening who engage in constant repartee or the dozens with each other about their “mamas.” This type of humor is the continuation of a mixture, according to Peterson, of comedy and cruelty, which imitates culture in general and specifically black sitcoms. Poussaint, however, insured that The Cosby Show did not use any humor or references that proved demeaning to people or that in any sense perpetuated stereotypes, prejudices or racial antagonisms in the creation of positive images. This dichotomy then leaves us with the unresolved issue of how the gaze is created by the television executives and for what reasons.

It is recognized that television networks are experiencing difficulties in black programming, especially with black sitcoms. They are struggling with responding economically to demographics that determine audience, advertising and economic profit. However, many critics of television declare that it should be a reflection of society. Ebony Utley in the article, “No Equality on Television” points out that the irony in the issue of black representation in television sitcoms and dramas decreased 7 percent in the last 6 seasons even though African Americans as a demographic comprise 12 percent of the general population. As previously stated, blacks watch 40 percent more television than whites. According to the Nielsen Media Research data, African Americans watch 20.2 more hours of television than non-blacks. Thus, the assumption made by television

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4 Ibid.
executives is that no new shows with African-American leads were necessary since African-Americans do not want to watch themselves on television. However, the executives either shun the Neilsen data or just do not understand the ramifications of their assumptions. They further maintain that African Americans do not have the economic power necessary to sustain black shows, yet statistics indicate that African Americans are massive consumers to the tune of some six billion odd dollars. Thirdly, executives state that black sitcoms and dramas do not have crossover appeal.

Thus, some critics say there should be segregation in television programming, after all, characters are people regardless of color. The argument continues with the assumption that television mirrors the integration seen and lived in society. As Utley sees it:

...if airing programs with minority representation is such a challenge for the networks, then maybe society isn’t as integrated as we think. If television is a mirror image of society, then figuring out how to represent minorities on television shouldn’t be this hard. 6

Prime-time television did not have a sufficient number of minority programs or had even considered it an issue until the NAACP began an investigation of the matter. On the other hand, shows with heavy minority representation such as The Cosby Show, A Different World, Living Single and New York Undercover, were seen by the critics as being too realistic or not realistic enough. As a rule they were relegated to limited replays on late or overnight television slots.


As Poussaint sees it:

With few exceptions, when television produces black shows, they create black sitcoms that foster the image of segregation. Blacks are characterized as buffoons who are childlike and irresponsible. This stereotype originated during slavery and has been perpetuated in white minds, especially the belief that African Americans are inferior. The all black sitcom—and so called ‘authentic’ black humor—fosters the idea that blacks and whites are too different culturally that integration is undesirable or unworkable.\(^7\)

After all, ‘television is supposed to mirror society. Are minorities really that marginalized? This is a concept all of us really need to watch.’

McWhorter, on the other hand, sees the move towards dramas in the 1970s as a means of dealing with tensions. He states:

Drama shows were somewhat more concerned with addressing the tensions that would soon transform the integrationist imperative into a separatist one, though usually more in the name of economic and racial justice than in the name of what we call ‘diversity.’\(^8\)

However, the bottom line is that scarcity of blacks is not entirely attributable to racial discrimination, racist television executives, but is rather an economic factor.

Achi comments that it is the media’s responsibility to serve every member of the community wherein they operate. For most networks, this is problematic and it is the principle which they must address in the present for equal representation in the future. “It is the racial identity in America which locates people in a certain set of experiences and conditions which only people of that racial group share. Thus viewing needs to be

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\(^7\) Poissant, 1.

negotiated on the basis of racial ethnic identity, thus becoming relevant to a network’s social responsibility dilemma.”

Mediated Messages

Therefore, this study is significant as it examines the mediated messages of selected black sitcoms based on the following research assumptions and questions.

The assumptions that will guide this study are:

1.) Recurring negative images of African Americans in television contribute to the social, political, and economic degradation of African-American people.

2.) The television industry, which is predominately white and male, continues to use negative images of African Americans to entertain themselves and maintain Eurocentric superiority.

3.) Many young African Americans have chosen to internalize the negative images as opposed to positive images of African Americans portrayed on television.

4.) African Americans appear more frequently on situation comedies than dramas.

The research questions for this study are:

1.) Are characters on African-American-themed sitcoms based on black stereotypes?

2.) Are the characters on African-American-themed sitcoms moving away from traditional black stereotypes, and does this progression lead to new categorizations of African-American images on television sitcoms?
3.) What mediated messages prevail as a result of the images used to portray African Americans on television sitcoms?

A study of this kind is needed in the field of media research because it not only categorizes the stereotypes, but also offers new discussion of mediated messages of African-American-themed sitcoms. Most scholars of African-American media content only focus only on stereotypical images and do not consider other qualities found in African-American sitcoms.

**Media Images**

Media images help us shape our view of the world and our values. Radio, television, film, and other mass media products provide materials out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of self, our gender, identification, our sense of class, our ethnicity, our race, and our sexuality. Media representations provide symbolic myths and resources through which we constitute a common reality and, through appropriation, an insertion of ourselves into America. The media is a profound source of cultural edification that can educate us on how to behave, what to think, and what to feel and believe.

The examination of images and messages about African-Americans in the mass media has always been a complex as well as a complicated issue. The mass media offer representations of the social world, images, and explanations of how the world operates. From its inception, television has offered dehumanizing images of African Americans. Dehumanizing images are not new; they have existed on all levels of entertainment and popular culture. Examples of these images existed in early print advertising, newspapers, magazines, books, minstrelsy, and film.
Sterling Brown, a prominent African-American scholar, was the first to identify and categorize the images of African Americans in popular culture. In *The Negro in American Fiction*, Brown discussed the fictional representations of African Americans by both whites and African Americans. In this process, he identified several caricatures, particularly, the contented slave, wretched freedman, tragic mulatto, brute Negro, and comic Negro. The dominant trend in African-American portraiture in popular culture has been created and nurtured by succeeding generations of Eurocentric image makers beginning as far back as the colonial era. Since the 1800s, African Americans have been typified as mammies, sambos, bucks, coons, and jezebels. However, the researcher proposes that there are other images, which are often ignored and viewed as characters fitting Donald Bogle’s notions of these images. Patricia Hill Collins adds the “Sapphire” image.

In American society, race remains a primary component of ideological consciousness. The United States has been a country where race is a crucial part of African-American and European-American identities. The portrayal of African-American women and men on television is deeply rooted in the racial ideologies and myths of the United States. Additionally, white media owners and producers have appropriated aspects of African-American culture to enrich the mainstream culture and themselves. From the enslavement of Africans, to the assimilation of African Americans into mainstream American culture, Eurocentric modes of thought have created images of Africans as inferior while maintaining European superiority. In the white gaze, i.e., the white...

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representation of blackness flows through the media in direct response to the presentation of America’s racial experiences. Racism influences the media by prompting stereotypes and negative ideas of African Americans.

Today, the stereotypical images of African Americans still permeate in mainstream popular culture. Images such as the “big mouthed, finger snapping mama” to the “big baller” with baggy pants are increasingly mirrored, not only in the African American community, but society as a whole. For example, television sitcoms such as the Eddie Murphy’s The P.J’s, give viewers a distorted and unrealistic view of African Americans. The P.J’s, characters are African Americans who seem to live happily in ghettos and that the vices of unemployment, poverty, and ignorance are offered as humorous. There are pivotal shows depicting African Americans in a more humanistic manner.

Reflective discourse and discussion of images of African Americans on television sitcoms must include the impact of humor in the lives of African Americans. Humor can be viewed as a coping strategy. Laughter allows the individual or the group to maintain a sense of balance—a sense of mental stability, especially in the wake of tragic situations. If one gives in to the situation-one loses that emotional sense of control. Hence, humor for African Americans is a control and survival mechanism for dealing with the inequalities of society. The group, especially African American, laughs to keep from crying. Therefore, there is an appeal of sitcoms for African Americans.
Significance of Research

1.) This study presents an alternative perspective for analysis of African-American characters and images on television sitcoms since the literature is scarce.

2.) This study will offer new insight and categorizations of African American images on black-themed sitcoms.

3.) This study will also analyze the mediated messages by examining the intent of the sitcom and juxtaposing the intent with the actual meaning of the show.

Organization of the Remainder of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters: Chapter One, Introduction, states the research questions, rational, significance, and definitions for this study. Chapter Two, Context of the Problem, offers a brief history of African-American images in the media. Chapter Three, Literature Review and Theoretical Framework discusses how scholars define the images of African Americans on television and theoretically explain the problem. Chapter Four gives the methodology used in this study. Chapter Five, Reality vs. Representation of Stereotypes in African-American Sitcoms, is the conceptual analysis and deconstructs the various stereotypes used in black sitcoms, while offering intended and mediated messages as well as new characterizations. Chapter Six, Conclusion, concludes the study and offers ideas and suggestions for further research.
Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used in the examination of African Americans in television sitcoms:

**Representation**
Refers to the construction in any medium, especially the mass media, of aspects of reality such as people, places, objects, events, and cultural identities.

**Stereotype**
Ideologies or myths used to characterize a group of people.

**The Tom**
Image of the Good Negro. Bogle suggests that toms are always chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, insulted, but they keep their faith and never turn against their masters. They remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and compassionate.¹⁰

**The Coon**
Image of the no account-niggers, unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language.¹¹

**The Pickaninny**
Refers to the black child, a harmless, screwball creation whose eyes popped and hair stood on end with the least excitement.¹²

**The Uncle Remus**
A harmless friendly naïve black man, who usually was a wise comic.¹³

**The Tragic Mulatto**
Usually fair-skinned, trying to pathetically pass for white. This image is a sympathetic character because of her biracialness.¹⁴

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¹¹ Ibid, 5.

¹² Ibid., 6.

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ Ibid.
The Mammy

The African-American woman who is usually loud, independent, overweight, asexual, and dutifully serves her white family.15

The Brutal Black Buck

Refers to the oversexed, savage, violent black man who lusts after white women.16

Popular Culture

The particular period in time where aesthetics, music, fashion, political, economic, and social trends are predetermined.

Mediated Messages

The juxtaposition of the intent of a situation comedy with the actual portrayal or meaning of the characters in a sitcom. The alternative meaning or image that a particular sitcom reveals which contrasts the original intent of the sitcom.

Situation Comedy

A radio or television comedy series that involves a continuing of characters in a succession of episodes.

Sapphire

Derivative of the Mammy image, which suggests that African-American women are bossy, smart-mouthed, bitchy, independent, and usually creates conflict with African-American men.

Sitcom

A radio or television comedy series that involves a continuing cast of characters in a succession of episodes.

African-American/Black Themed Comedies

Refers to situation comedies/sitcoms featuring predominately African-American characters.

Deconstruction

Method of critical analysis of philosophical and literary language.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.
CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM

From *The Beulah Show* to the *Hughleys*, questionable images have existed throughout the evolution of African-Americans images on television sitcoms. While there have been shows that portrayed African Americans as multidimensional, the majority of sitcoms have depicted African Americans as comedic, one-dimensional. African-American situation comedies, in particular, seem to characterize African-American men and women as lazy, shiftless, loud-mouthed, or jokesters. The social construction of mediated images of African Americans on television sitcoms involves an in-depth reflection and discourse on racism, the history of African Americans in the media, and the stereotypes and images relegated to African Americans on television.

**Stereotypical Images**

Stereotypical images of African Americans are deeply rooted in the racial ideology that justified the enslavement and colonization of African peoples. During colonization, Europeans believed that Africans were biologically inferior and resembled wild, barbaric creatures. African men and women were physically and mentally oppressed under the assumption that they were a non-human species. Of course this ideology did not interfere with sexual copulation of European men and African women. The enslavement of Africans was not only a result of biological oppression, but of the
ideology of racial superiority. Because Europeans deemed Africans as the "other," racial stereotypes and images were developed to justify their oppression. Images and stereotypes existed prior to and after slavery. Europeans viewed Africans as sub-human. This was in part due to the European supremacist ideologies that contributed to the negative perceptions of Africans. The early images of African Americans were first seen in print. Grotesque portrayals of advertisements depicted Africans as barbaric creatures. In many instances the features were overtly exaggerated. For example, product ads showed Africans with bulging eyes, extremely large lips, and many instances, razor sharp teeth. In addition, images such as the "Mammy," "Sambo," and "Pickaninny" became emblems of products such as soap, sugar, flour, rice, etc. Toy caricatures of African Americans were created using the same grotesque images.

During the enslavement of Africans, several stereotypes derived out of the Europeans' perception of Africans. White colonists, slave masters, and mistresses relegated Africans to certain roles. Many images derived from these roles. The "Mammy" was the fierce independent woman who gave undue allegiance to her white family.

During slavery, the "Mammy" was usually the head of the domestic organization of the master's house. Whites viewed her as loyal, asexual, and jolly. Another image that was made popular was the "Tom." This depiction of African-American manhood

2 Ibid., 282.
4 Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought (New York: Routledge, 1990), 70-73.
that of the “Good Negro,” always accepting punishment, but keeping the faith and never straying from the white masters.\textsuperscript{6} The “Tom” was in many ways the male counterpart of the “Mammy” stereotype.

Other images which, are ardently embedded in slavery are the “Coon,” “Pickaninny,” and “Wench.” The “Coon” was the comic or jester. The actions of the “Coon” were purely for the entertainment of Europeans.\textsuperscript{7} They were further considered to be amusement objects and black buffoons. Many young masters and mistresses had a “Coon” as their human toys. Whites often referred to African children as “Pickaninnies.” They were also considered to be the children of the “Coon” and served as playmates for young masters and mistresses. The “Wench,” or so-called lascivious African woman, was used as the sexual object for white men.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{Minstrelsy and the Significance of Blackface}

Many forms of entertainment developed out of the preconceived notions by Europeans of their superiority, and the roles and images used to depict African Americans. Since Europeans believed that Africans were an inferior race, Europeans chose to entertain themselves by reiterating their control and dominance over Africans. Minstrelsy was the most popular nineteenth-century American vernacular entertainment, featuring white performers masking African-American culture.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{6} Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: Continuum, 1989), 9.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{8} Deborah Gray White, Ar’n’t I a Woman? : Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 32-38.

During the 1800s, minstrel companies were extremely popular in Great Britain, Australia, and other English-speaking countries. Minstrelsy created misleading and dehumanizing stereotypical images of African Americans. Minstrelsy proceeded the Jim Crow era and proved to be detrimental to the image of African-American culture.

Minstrelsy also captured the unique elements of African-American humor and song, especially during the late nineteenth century, when a number of African-American minstrel troupes appeared. Although black minstrel companies were largely trapped by the stereotypes of white minstrelsy, they nonetheless provided an important showcase for black performing talent and served as a springboard for black participation in the twentieth-century entertainment industry. The only downfall was that blacks had to perform in blackface. In other words, the imitated became the imitator.

Thomas D. "Daddy" Rice was the forerunner of American minstrelsy. In circa 1828, Rice began impersonating a black man during the intermissions in a minor drama of the period. His act featured a song and dance that became known as "Jim Crow." Rice claimed that he based his sketch on a song and dance he had seen performed by a crippled African-American man. The chorus of the song was as follows:

Wheel about an' turn about an' do jes so,  
An' eb'ry time I wheel about, I jump Jim Crow.11

Rice dressed his "Jim Crow" character in the long blue coat and striped pants. His sketch captured the applause of white audiences to the extent that he added additional

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blackface characters and music to his performances. Another African-American source for Rice's minstrel act was the black street vendor and singer known as "Signor Cornmeali," or "Old Corn Meal." Signor Cornmeali traveled about New Orleans with horse and cart, selling cornmeal and singing such songs as "Rosin Up the Bow" and his own "Fresh Corn Meal" in a rich baritone alternating with a resonant falsetto. Thomas "Daddy" Rice heard Cornmeali in 1837 and soon added a sketch titled "Corn Meal" to his minstrel act. The use of minstrelsy in America was the beginning of the distortion of black humanity within the white imagination.

In an atmosphere marked by political acrimony and social tension, minstrelsy had a vital unifying function for white Americans. By constructing an image of the happy and contented plantation slaves and irresponsible "Coons," minstrel shows debunked the realities of slavery. In addition, antebellum minstrels and their antics served not only to entertain, but also to reassure their patrons of their own superiority. It also appeased notions of blackness in the white imagination.

Minstrel shows had a powerful impact on American culture; in particular, they served to "codify the public image of blacks as the prototypical fool or "Sambo." As Mel Watkins observed, by defining blackness so ludicrously, antebellum minstrels constructed a cultural "other" over whom all whites, regardless of economic class, could

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12 Ibid., 60-73.
13 Ibid., 55-61.
14 Ibid., 70-74.
feel superior. Thus, minstrelsy provided indirect but not inconsequential grounds for white social and political unity, at the expense of African Americans.

Although a greater number of African Americans took part in minstrelsy during the Civil War, the first influential black minstrel troupes appeared during the Reconstruction Era. In 1865-1866 an African-American company known as Brooker and Clayton's Georgia Minstrels toured in the Northeast, billing itself as "the Only Simon Pure Negro Troupe in the World." From 1866 to 1872 British minstrel dancer Sam Hague toured England with Sam Hague's Slave Troupe of Georgia Minstrels. A short time later, African American minstrel performer Charles Hicks organized yet another company of "Georgia Minstrels." As black minstrel troupes proved their popularity and profitability, their ownership and management generally fell into the hands of whites. By the mid-1870s, the most successful black minstrel troupes were all white-owned. This was due to the Europeans' need to control the capitalistic gains that minstrelsy brought to American society at large. African-American participation in minstrel shows was largely due to the economic conditions during the later part of the 18th century. African-American men and women used this form of entertainment to support themselves and their families.

Jim Crow and African Americans

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, many African Americans still enjoyed the rights granted in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution, along with the 1875 Civil Rights Act. By the late 1890s various factors

15 Ibid, 65.

16 Toll, 82-88.
had combined to create an environment in which white supremacy prevailed. The effects of Jim Crow laws had serious effects on African Americans living in the South during the first half of the twentieth century. African Americans saw constant and graphic reminders of their second-class citizenship everywhere. Signs reading "Whites Only" or "Colored" hung over drinking fountains and the doors to restrooms, restaurants, movie theaters, and other public places. Along with segregation, African Americans, particularly in the South, faced discrimination in jobs and housing and were disenfranchised of their constitutional rights. Whether by law or by custom, all these obstacles to equal status went by the name Jim Crow. 18

Jim Crow was the name of a character in minstrelsy, in which white performers in blackface used stereotypes to imitate black culture. Jim Crow has its origins in a variety of sources, including the Black Codes imposed upon African Americans immediately after the Civil War, and prewar racial apartheid of railroad cars in the North and South. It was not until after Reconstruction ended that Jim Crow was born.

Some of the earliest Jim Crow legislation came from the transportation industry. New Orleans's 1890 law requiring separate railroad cars for black and white passengers was soon followed by regulations in other cities and states. Such laws, ostensibly written to "protect" both races, were given federal support when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) that "separate but equal" accommodations on Louisiana's railroads were constitutional. 19 The ruling led to legalized apartheid in education, public parks, and libraries. Thus, representing the hierarchy of whiteness over blackness, Jim

17 Crockell, 33-40.
18 Franklin, 215-226.
Crow served as a means of social control, especially in terms of how African Americans should be represented in the minds of whites.

The discourse of social construction of images in the media is problematic. Various factions in American society have used the practice of racial stereotyping through the use of media throughout contemporary history. The practice is used most by the dominant culture as a way of suppressing African Americans with controlling images.

**Early Black Images in Cinema**

The effects of enslavement, minstrelsy, and “Jim Crow” led to the racist imageries seen in D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*. This silent film was introduced in 1915 and immediately caused controversy between African Americans and whites. The theme of the film was based on the ideology that Africans were inferior and should be disenfranchised from political, social, and economic power.20 The film told the story of the “Old South,” the Civil War and the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. Basing his film on Thomas Dixon’s, *The Clansmen*, Griffith’s film revealed the bigotry that Africans should remain in servitude because without blacks in their place, “it would disrupt the moral order of society.” *The Birth of a Nation* remains significant not only because of its artistry, but also of its vast influence on the media. Griffith used several images to negatively portray African Americans. However, it continued the notions of minstrelsy since the actors who portrayed African Americans were whites in blackface. First were the “faithful souls,” the “Mammy” and “Uncle Tom,” the “Pickaninnies” who are seen singing and dancing in happy servitude, and the “Tragic Mulatta,” and the “Brutal

The "Brutal Buck" is a critical image due to the fact that this image represented African-American men as sexualized bestial creatures lustfully desiring white women.

The Reconstruction scenes in *Birth of a Nation* are especially harsh. African-American members of Congress are portrayed as arrogant, unknowledgeable about politics, lustful, and drunken. African Americans are depicted going about the business of the country coarsely reclining in their congressional chairs with bare feet positioned upon their desks. When the film was released small riots broke out in Boston and other cities. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sought to have the film banned because it popularized ill-conceived beliefs and notions of African-American culture. *The Birth of a Nation* was popular for a decade and doubtlessly did much damage to race relations.

The early 19th century proved to be a period where images of African Americans were concentrated in the same images. There were several movies, which depicted African Americans as ignorant, lazy, shiftless, and yet loyal to whites. Films such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927), *Our Gang* (1927), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) were characterized with negative imagery of African Americans. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a film that characterized African-American men as "Toms":

Porter's tom was the first in a line of socially acceptable Good Negro characters. Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n'er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind. Thus they endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts.

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21 Bogle, 10-18.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 24-31.
24 Ibid, 6.
Our Gang revolved around the lives of lower-middle class American children. Featured in Our Gang were black child actors, Farina, Stymie, and Buckwheat. The children, who were often referred to as “Pickaninnies” usually spoke in broken English, wore pigtails in their hair that stood straight up, and wore oversized clothing. In Our Gang, African-American children were always portrayed as chicken and watermelon eaters. In addition, the “Mammy” image was captured in films such as Coon Town Suffragettes (1914), Birth of a Nation (1915), and Gone with the Wind (1939).

Bogle suggests that the stereotypes in early cinema were used to perpetuate the inferiority of African Americans:

All were character types used for the same effect: to entertain by stressing Negro inferiority. Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey. None of the types was meant to do great harm, although at various times individual ones had existed since the days of slavery and were already popularized in American life and arts. The movies, which catered to public tastes, borrowed profusely from all the other popular art forms. When dealing with black characters, they simply adapted the old familiar stereotypes, often further distorting them.

Although films in the 1920s possess negative images and portraiture of African Americans, black filmmakers such as Noble Johnson and Oscar Micheaux challenged the existing stereotypes of African-American culture with their films, which focused on racial uplift. Noble Johnson’s first production was The Realization of a Negro’s Ambition (1916). The plot concerned a young engineering graduate of the Tuskegee Institute who leaves the family farm to try his hand in the oil fields of Los Angeles. Turned away because he is black, the young man rescues a white woman in a runaway carriage. She turns out to be the daughter of the oil company owner, who offers the young man a job.

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25 Ibid., 26-27.
26 Ibid., 4.
with the company's oil exploration team. Later, the young engineer realizes that his parents' farmland shows oil possibilities, and the company owner bankrolls the exploratory drilling tests that eventually prove successful. Johnson's film focuses on economic success regardless of racial prejudice. This film, just as others that he produced, presented African Americans as humanistic—people with real stories and situations that did not perpetuate racist stereotypes.

Micheaux's greatest contribution to black media is that his films reflected the interest and outlooks of the black bourgeoisie. Micheaux's race film, *Within Our Gates* (1920), was one of the most controversial African-American films. This film was a response to D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. At the same time, Micheaux scrambled for money to make a new film that would showcase African Americans in a positive light as well as confront timely racial issues. Released just five months after the Chicago Race Riots and the "Red Summer of 1919," *Within Our Gates* contained a riot-lynching scene which reflected American race relations in the early part of the century. The film included a sequence depicting the lynching of two innocent African Americans, a woman and her sharecropper husband, who were accused of murdering his employer, a white plantation owner. Other films of Micheaux included *God's Stepchildren* (1937) and *Birthright* (1924). *Birthright* tells the story around a black Harvard graduate who travels to his hometown of Tennessee to start a "colored" college. Both black and whites oppose the school because of the belief that education ruins a Negro. *God's Stepchildren* focuses on lighter skinned blacks passing for whites. Although Micheaux focused on the black bourgeoisie, he portrayed the image of African Americans being just as affluent,
educated, and cultured as whites. Both Oscar Micheaux and Noble Johnson would pave the way for future African-American media artists to present African-American culture with all of its ramifications.

**Black Images and Television**

Sitcoms on radio were a precursor to the sitcoms that would evolve on television. Early television became an establishment by borrowing heavily from radio. Radio prospered with weekly programming, which provided a variety of shows, but most importantly, it is significant because it pushed forward the creation of the sitcom. Sitcoms on radio were morality dramatizations that focused on honesty, loyalty, family, and work ethics. Shows such as *Beulah* and *Amos 'n Andy* were sitcoms that started on radio and eventually develop into television sitcoms.

The stereotypical images of African Americans on television sitcoms would evolve into portraiture that evoked continued perception of African-American inferiority. It would not be until the 1980s where African Americans would be presented in a more positive reality which did not depict subordinate lifestyles of African Americans.

The *Beulah Show* (1950-53) continued the image of the “Mammy.” The show depicted a happy-go-lucky maid who was dutifully and graciously obliged to her white family. The show was devoid of issues on race relations. It did, however, suggest that African Americans are happy to be the servants of whites. *Amos 'n Andy* furthered many images by portraying African American men as “Coons,” shiftless, dumb, and lazy. An

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27 Bogle, 109-115.

Jones and Cicely Tyson, *East Side, West Side* featured sophisticated writing and provocative situations depicting both life in the ghetto and the pain of integration. The show presented Cicely Tyson’s character as a professional social worker who, Bogle notes, challenged the European image of beauty:

In this small, seemingly throwaway role, Tyson ushered in a whole new bearing and aesthetic for African American women on television. Slender and taut, neither grinning nor performing domestic duties, here was a dark African American woman who was the complete antithesis of the long cherished mammy figure. Tyson wore her hair in a natural (becoming the first Black woman to do so in a weekly series), before the Afro had widespread acceptance, even within the African American community. With her flawless skin, chiseled features, and luminous eyes, Tyson was a beautiful woman but not in the traditional Western sense. She may well have viewers rethink their definition of beauty.29

The 1960s also ushered in integrated shows such as *Julia* and *I Spy*.30 To not use offensive stereotypes and images, television sitcom creators and producers often created images of African Americans, which portrayed the assimilable and “upper echelon” of African-American culture. *I Spy* (1965-1968), that starred Bill Cosby and Robert Culp as an interracial team of secret agents presented Cosby’s character, Alexander Scott, as a sophisticated Rhodes scholar. *Julia* (1968-1971) featured Diahann Carroll as a widowed nurse and single mother. Characterized as an “assimilated Negro” by critics, and suspected of being played by a white actress in darkening makeup, Carroll’s *Julia* never encountered poverty, but did, however, encounter racism. Still, *Julia* was, according to African American actress Esther Rolle, "a step above the grinning domestic."31 Overall both *I Spy* and *Julia* represented the middle-class lifestyles of a segment in African American culture. Critics did fail to realize that W.E.B. DuBois advocated the idea of

29 Ibid., 111-112.
upward mobility and integration. Further, critics failed to acknowledge that African-American culture was not one dimensional. Though small in size, the middle class participated in entrepreneurial and educational opportunities and lifestyles.

By the 1970s television sitcoms began to emerge from their surreal world to present programming which was more in touch with the reality of the turbulent times. The first comedy series to address racism was All in the Family (1971-1979), a show with a mostly white cast. The main character was Archie Bunker (played by Carroll O'Connor), an unrepentant racist, sexist and homophobe. The importance of All in the Family was that it was the first show to candidly and vividly reveal whites’ perceptions of African Americans. The Bunkers neighbors, the Jeffersons, were an African-American couple who often debated with Archie Bunker about his prejudice.

Significant changes of African-American images on television were in children's programs. Starting in 1969 the public television series Sesame Street showed children and adults of a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds interacting and learning. The Electric Company also features many of the elements as Sesame Street. Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids (1972-1989) was an animated version of children and events from producer Bill Cosby's own Philadelphia childhood. Instead of being presented as "Pickaninnies," Sesame Street, The Electric Company, and Fat Albert showed African-American children as smart, witty, and intelligent in various productive learning environments.

Produced by the All in the Family team, Good Times (1974-1979) was the first


33 Ibid., 101-103.
television comedy to focus on the African-American poor family. A spin-off of *Maude*, the show suggested images of the togetherness of family throughout hard times. However, social importance gave way to "Coon" imagery, as the show increasingly revolved around the "Coon" like mischief of JJ, the elder son.\(^{34}\)

The 1970s saw a dramatic rise in the number of television shows built around black characters. *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977) starred the veteran comedian Redd Foxx as a junk dealer and Demond Wilson as his long-suffering son. Its wide popularity derived in part from its self-aware use of stereotypical aspects of African-American humor, elaborate insults, sapphire women, scheming men, and it inspired a succession of comical shows, including *Grady* (1975-1976), *Baby I'm Back* (1978), and *What's Happenin'* (1976-1979).\(^{35}\)

No dramatic series starring a black actor aired until the 1980s. But it was in drama, made-for-television movies, and miniseries, that some of the most significant television images of African Americans emerged in the 1970s. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974), starring Cicely Tyson, was hailed as possibly the finest movie ever made for television. The movie, a series memories is set in 1962 and traces Pittman's life from her childhood in slavery to the civil rights era she lived to see (the character is 110 years old). Its climactic scene features Pittman bending to take a sip of water from whites-only water fountain.\(^{36}\)

*Roots*, which aired over eight nights in 1977, was a television event not only for African Americans but also for all Americans. The highest-rated miniseries ever, *Roots*,

\(^{34}\) Donald Bogle, Blacks in American Film and Television: An Illustrated Encyclopedia (New York: Continuum, 1994, 318.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 325-30.
based on Alex Haley's book about his family's history from freedom in Africa to slavery in the American South, attracted an estimated 130 million viewers. Roots was also a showcase for many African-American actors including Levar Burton, Cicely Tyson, and Louis Gossett, Jr.

By the late 1970s, African-American actors appeared in soap operas, as costars in dramatic series, and as the focal point of situation comedies. In the wake of Roots, several television movies, including King (1978), Roots: The Next Generations (1979), and Attica (1980), featured African-American historical themes. But most depictions of blacks in television continued to follow the pattern of stereotypical comedy. Rarely allowed to exist as fully realized human beings, some of the most popular African-American characters of the early 1980s were the "new Pickaninnies," highly opinionated black children adopted into white families, the situation in both Different Strokes (1978-1986) and Webster (1983-1987).

When The Cosby Show debuted in 1984, it won enthusiastic reviews from both African American and white audiences. Focusing on a loving, intact, successful African-American family, The Cosby Show starred Bill Cosby and Phylicia Rashad as the upper-middle class professional parents of five children. The show revealed a caring, supportive familial structure that often blended humor with wisdom to strengthen the family bond. Cosby, who had long criticized the negative portrayals of African Americans in television, consulted psychiatrist Dr. Alvin Poussaint in writing and producing the program, which resulted in a positive and educational tone. Overall, the

36 Ibid., 440.
37 Ibid., 441.
images presented in *The Cosby Show* depicted the African-American family as a powerful medium in black life.

Another series that gave a more multidimensional depiction of African Americans was the short-lived *Frank's Place* (1987-1988), a series about a black professor who inherits a New Orleans restaurant. *Frank's Place* showed African Americans portrayed not monolithically, but with the broader range of humanity. Although the well-written show won an Emmy Award, it was canceled after one season.

Like Cosby and Reid, a rising number of African Americans began working behind the television camera in the late 1980s and early 1990s, resulting in a flowering of black-themed shows. *A Different World* (1987-1993), that spun off from *Cosby* and was produced by Debbie Allen, depicted life at a historically black university. *A Different World* gave viewers positive images of African-American college students at an historic African American university. Others included Quincy Jones's *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990-1996), starring Will Smith, which suggested that successful African Americans could live and work in predominately white neighborhoods without losing sight of their culture and heritage. In addition, *In Living Color* (1990-1993, produced by Keenan Ivory Wayans), was, one of the then-new Fox network's first hits that brought freshness and irreverence to its humor, much of which was based on racial stereotypes such as the “Coon” and “Sapphire.” The “Sapphire” character was usually an African-American man imitating an African-American woman.

Fox, which also produced *Living Single, Martin*, and *South Central*, was the first network to focus so much energy on attracting black audiences with shows featuring African-American actors. Many of the sitcoms, with the exception of *Living Single,*
merely perpetuated the old, negative stereotypes, in the lingo of the hip-hop generation. For example, Martin Lawrence’s *Martin* consisted of many images, such as the “Coon.” But with the increasing fragmentation of the television audience, caused in part by the growth of cable television, African-American viewers responded eagerly to the new black shows.

By the late 1990s more African Americans than ever were involved in the television industry, some in executive and production roles. Taboos against interracial sex and other forms of social equality had eroded. But there were still no prime-time dramatic series devoted to telling the stories of African Americans, and many of the images seen by African-American children (who are estimated to watch television at a rate 64 percent higher than the national average) continued to perpetuate limited roles.

The social construction of images of African Americans is complicated and complex. On one hand you have creative African-American actors who are in desperate need for employment within the television industry, yet the work that they produce continues to create and further perpetuate questionable images that distort African Americans.
CHAPTER THREE
LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A. Review of Literature

The social construction of images in American media is deeply rooted in Eurocentric racial ideology, which implies that whites are superior to African Americans. All of the black stereotypes used in the media were to entertain whites while undermining and controlling African-American humanity. Donald Bogle, in Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, characterizes the images of African Americans in the media by documenting the early portraiture of African Americans in the genre of film. Bogle suggests that Hollywood first began the destruction of black culture in the media with the image of the "Uncle Tom." He states:

The year was 1903. The mechanic turned movie director was Edwin S. Porter. The twelve-minute motion picture was Uncle Tom's Cabin. And the new dimension was Uncle Tom himself. He was the American movies' first black character. The great paradox was that in actuality Tom was not black at all. Instead, he was a nameless, slightly overweight white actor made up in blackface.¹

Bogle argues that the image of the "Tom" was the first acceptable "good" Negro characters. The characteristics of "Toms" that Bogle presents reveal an undying loyalty and servitude to whites:

¹ Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: Continuum, 1997), 3.
Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, ne'er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind. Thus they endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts.\footnote{Ibid., 4.}

Bogle documents that two early “Toms” appeared in Confederate Spy (1910) and For Massa’s Sake (1911). In Confederate Spy, the “Tom,” Uncle Daniel is the martyr dying before a Union firing squad and is content that he died for the cause of continued slavery in the confederacy. In For Massa’s Sake, a former slave is so endeared to his master that he sells himself back into slavery.\footnote{Ibid., 6.} Although not based in reality, these themes satisfied the psyche of the white audience.

Another image that Bogle typifies is the “Coon,” which presented African Americans as amusement objects and black buffoons.\footnote{Ibid., 7.} This image was first introduced as the “Pickanniny”:

The pickaninny was the first of the coon types to make its screen debut. It gave the Negro child actor his place in the black pantheon. Generally, he was a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting.\footnote{Ibid.}

Thomas Alva first introduced the image with Ten Pickaninnies in 1904. This film referred to black children as “inky kids,” “black lambs,” “smoky kids,” and “bad chillun.” Well known pickaninnies such as Farina, Sunshine Sammie, Stymie, and Buckwheat carried the image to new horizons. Movies such as Our Gang created representations that were demeaning and exploitative of African-American children. The
“Coon” represents the comic, ignorant entertainer who pleases whites with his never-ending buffoonery. The “Uncle Remus” is also a pillar of the coon triumvirate. Bogle states that The “Uncle” was the non-threatening Negro:

The final member of the coon triumvirate is the uncle remus. Harmless and congenial, he is a first cousin to the tom, yet he distinguishes himself by his quaint, naïve, and comic philosophizing.

The “Uncle” did not appear on screen until the 1930s and 1940s with The Green Pastures (1936) and Song of the South (1946). Bogle argues that the “Uncle Remus” image was used by Hollywood to imply that African-American men were content and satisfied with their own inferiority. This portrayal was gratifying to whites because it concurred with their beliefs of racial superiority.

Bogle contends that the controversial “Tragic Mulatto” occurred because the character often passed for white. The earliest appearances was The Debt (1912) in which a white man’s wife and his black mistress bear children at the same time. The son and daughter without their blood relationship known to each other, fall in love only to discover that they are sister and brother. It is ironic that their lives are not ruined because of their relationship, but because the daughter has a drop of black blood.

The “Mammy” image is considered to be the female counterpart of the “Tom.”

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6 Ibid., 8
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 8.
9 Ibid., 9.
Bogle argues that the "Mammy" is unprecedented by her sexuality and independence. She is usually big, fat, and cantankerous. Bogle asserts that the "Mammy" is so closely related to the "Coon" that she is usually portrayed in a comical, yet loyal depiction. The "Mammy" image first appeared in 1914 with the release of *Coon Town Suffragettes*, which centered on domestics who created a watchful bond over their "good for nothing" husbands. The "Mammy's" offshoot image, the "Aunt Jemima," is considered to be sweet, jolly, and good-tempered. The "Aunt Jemima" is also more conceding and assimilates into white culture.

The final image that Bogle analyzes in the film genre is the "Black Brutal Buck." This image appeared in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. African-American men were depicted as angry, overtly sexual brutes that desired to sexually consume white women. The underlying assumption of this image suggests that black men should be lynched in order to protect white womanhood. The images presented by Bogle provide a basis for the portraiture of African Americans in film prior to the evolution of television.

Marimba Ani argues that Europeans view themselves as a higher human species and recognize other peoples of the world as inferior. For example, Europeans see themselves as rational, civilized, and enterprising, while "others" are considered irrational, primitive, and apathetic. Ani contends that Europeans create negative

\[\text{10 Ibid., 10.}\]
\[\text{11 Ibid., 11.}\]
\[\text{12 Ibid.}\]
images of people of African descent. She also argues that during the Reconstruction era, Africans were the primary targets of dehumanizing images:

In the aftermath of slavery, during “Reconstruction” in the United States (the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, the image of the African suffered under a systematic assault of visual propaganda, at the hands of American whites.\footnote{Ibid., 294.}

Ani conceptualizes the psychological premise of negative imagery of Africans:

It was important to the system of white supremacy that (1) white people continually reinforce their European consciousness at the expense of the African image, i.e., through our degradation, and (2) that the African continued to act like “slaves” of a new sort and indeed become what Europeans portrayed them to be.\footnote{Ibid.}

Thus, the degradation of African Americans in the media was to appease the white audience. Ani suggests that the images, which appear in the media, distorted the characteristics of the African body. A prime example that she uses is product advertising and “black memorabilia:

Black faces were used to sell everything from toothpaste to pancakes. Distorted images appeared on boxes and tubes, and even on vaudeville stages to make white people laugh. The “faces” which appeared, distorted carefully chosen characteristics of the African physiognomy: the color of the skin, the texture of the hair, the contours of the lips and the nose.\footnote{Ibid., 294-95.}

Ani further posits that as Hollywood took over the image-making enterprise, Europeans and Africans rejected what was aesthetically African.\footnote{Ibid.} Because Hollywood remained supreme in reinforcing the European image, it created devastating images of non-Europeans, more specifically, African Americans.
According to Ani, the images of Africans were created to support the characteristics of the Europeans self-image. As presenting non-Europeans as subhuman, Europeans validate themselves with supremacy and superiority. Ani provides a rationale for white-centered media as it relates to the images of African Americans on television. In addition, it provides a historical framework for the Eurocentric racial ideology that convinced white media owners to dehumanize Africans.

Patricia Hill Collins defines the images produced by the Eurocentric mode of thought in Black Feminist Thought. Collins suggests that Europeans have subjected African-American women to controlling images due to racist myths and ideologies. These images are the “Mammy,” the “Matriarch,” the “Welfare Queen,” and the “Jezebel.” The mammy image is consistent with the analysis presented by Donald Bogle. Collins, however, further deconstructs the image by asserting that:

The first controlling image applied to African-American women is that of the mammy—the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women’s behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and ‘family’ better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her white ‘family,’ the mammy still knows her place as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination.

Collins does not however address the idea that the “Mammy” was used to also dehumanize and emasculate African-American men. While the “Mammy” is the mother

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18 Ibid., 296.
19 Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought (New York: Routledge, 1990), 71.
figure in white households, the “Matriarch” is the head of black households. Collins juxtaposes both the “Mammy” and “Matriarch” and gives the following analysis:

Just as the mammy represents the ‘good’ Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the ‘bad’ Black mother. The modern Black matriarchy thesis contends that African-American women fail to fulfill their traditional ‘womanly’ duties. Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly cannot properly supervise their children and are a major factor to their children’s school failure.\(^{20}\)

The controlling image, the “Welfare Queen” image implies that African-American women have children repeatedly in order to receive financial assistance from the government:

A third, externally defined, controlling image of Black womanhood—that of the welfare mother—appears tied to Black women’s increasing dependence on the post World War II welfare state. Essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image created during slavery; this image provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women’s fertility to the needs of a changing political economy.\(^{21}\)

Collins further constructs a historical analysis of the “Welfare Queen” image:

During slavery the breeder woman image portrayed Black women as more suitable for having children than white women. By claiming that Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals, this objectification of Black women as the Other provided justification for interference in the reproductive rights of enslaved Africans.\(^{22}\)

In addition, the “Jezebel” image refers to African-American women as being lascivious in nature and women who use their bodies as sexual objects:

The fourth image—the Jezebel, whore, or sexually aggressive woman—is central in this nexus of elite white male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie in the heart of Black women’s oppression. The image of the Jezebel originated under

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 73-74.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 76.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
slavery when Black women were being portrayed as being sexually aggressive wet nurses.23

According to Collins, the “Jezebel” image was used as a justification by white men to repeatedly sexually assault African-American women.24

The images that Collins discusses are evident in television sitcoms, such as The Beulah Show. For example, the show centers on the portrayal of the happy and faithful servant who is dutifully obligated to her white family over her own. Her character also signifies many of the tenets of the “Mammy” image such as asexuality, obesity, and independence, yet she knows her place within the household. Similar images are also present in Good Times and Julia.

Karen Ross proposes that the images of black people in the media are rooted in colonialism, biological determination, and exploratory myths. Traditional images such as the happy slave, noble savage, and the entertainer have evolved into the argumentative housekeeper, the starving Ethiopian, and the pop star.25 Ross agrees with Ani by suggesting that Europeans have typified people of African descent as the “other” in order to entertain themselves by further dehumanizing African culture. Ross also suggests that both film and television utilize unrealistic stereotypical images, however, they create realistic social consequences.

Ross further argues that the “Mammy,” “Tragic Mulatto,” and “Siren/Whore” roles were relegated to black women while black men portrayed villains, fools, and

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23 Ibid., 77
24 Ibid.
faithful servants. But, black women were often allowed to be witty and smart-mouthed. black women were cast in dominant roles, especially in male-female relationship portrayals for the purpose of emasculating black men and therefore, reducing the threat of black male power. Ross suggests that the film and television industry could afford to position black women over black men because white producers knew that black women in fact did not possess power. This factor is important to the study because it suggests that a gender dichotomy of images exists in the roles of African-American men and women. In reference to the “Mammy” image, Ross critically deconstructs the image by suggesting that the “Mammy” embodies two deeply rooted myths of black womanhood: the faithful servant and earth mother. In addition, the sole purpose of the “Mammy” was to remove power from women and fracture the black family. Ross’ analysis is accurate concerning the characterizations of the “Mammy,” however, power was not removed from white women, instead, white women were portrayed as delicate, weak, and pure while ordering the “Mammy” to fulfill household duties. In other words, white women were depicted as the “queen” of their castles.

Janette Dates article, “Commercial Television” proposes that the values of African-Americans on commercial television are not seen through their own experiences, but through the eyes of white producers, writers, and network owners. Since the inception of television sitcoms, the overwhelming portraiture of African Americans have

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 6.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 8.
been non-dramatic and comedic. Dates assumes that white decision-makers were convinced that television viewers could not conceive or watch programs depicting African Americans in serious roles. Dates does present that during the 1960s and 1970s, white producers created shows to “reflect” the current social environment. Dates argues that European culture has established images such as the “Mammy,” “Tom,” and “Coon” and structures that impede the development and recognition of African-American culture, spanning from minstrel shows through today’s hi-tech mass media.  

Clarence Spigner discusses the images of African Americans on television in “Black Impressions: Television and Film Imagery.” Spigner suggests that television is currently over-populated with African-American comics who represent negative caricatures. Television comedies rather than dramas are more likely to have African Americans in leading roles. It is inherently easier for viewers, including African Americans to laugh at African Americans than to see them in realistic characterizations. Spigner argues that racism is the underlying factor of the disparities of African-American depictions on television. He also asserts that African-American characters still possess the qualities of Butterfly McQueen; bulging their eyes, pouting their lips, and looking ignorant to promote white laughter. Spigner also reveals that shows such as *Roseanne* and *Grace Under Fire* address serious issues such as unemployment and domestic violence, while black shows, like *A Different World* present a more happy-go-lucky lifestyle. Spigner states that shows such as *In Living Color* and *Martin* devalue the existence of African-American women because of the cross-dressing in the shows. Furthermore, television propagates limited and demeaning images, which do not

30 Ibid., 9.
represent the complexity of African-American culture. Spigner does not address the implications of the cross dressing antics in *Martin* and *In Living Color*. In addition, *A Different World* portrayed African-American college life in a general perspective. It dealt with issues of rape, pregnancy, and hazing. For Spigner to suggest that all black shows present a happy-go-lucky mentality is disconcerting.

**B. Conceptual Framework**

Television reflects our racial, ethnic, gender and sexual values. In its flickering glow are captured American attitudes during the last half-century. Television is more than a recording device. It is also a powerful, unavoidable agent for change. Television creates and sustains the majority's accepted social stereotypes of minority groups. Depending on the group's place in American society, television's presentation will be either positive or negative.

The images presented on television sitcoms are consistent with the categorizations that Bogle, Dates, Ross, Cosby, and Collins suggest. The permeating question is what is the ongoing struggle of portrayals of African Americans on television sitcoms? From a historical perspective, it could be suggested that whites have created images not only to entertain themselves, but to also maintain their own power. In addition, whites confirm their inhumanity by presenting negative stereotypes of others, which in this case are African Americans. Ani suggests that the dominant white culture sustains the negative

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32 Clarence Spigner, "Black Impressions: Television and Film Imagery." *Crisis* 101, no.1 (Jan, 1994): 8
images of African Americans to maintain superiority and white supremacy.\textsuperscript{33} John Henrik Clark also suggests that Europeans have used the media as a tool for mind control.\textsuperscript{34} The images created by the Europeans are clearly the result of racism. When one culture (Europeans) views another culture (African Americans) as inferior, the dominant culture will use various forms of propaganda to demean and devalue that culture.\textsuperscript{35}

Racism in television media is a significant factor that forges into the spectrum of images of African Americans on sitcoms. The result is twofold. First, Hollywood creates images and identities of African Americans, which demonstrate inferiority and servitude. At the other end of the pendulum is the internalizing of the images and effects on cultural identity.

However, what we see today is problematic. Today, African-American writers and producers are continuing and yet creating more images which distort the realities of African Americans. These images exist in comical form. Shows such as the \textit{P.J’s}, \textit{Martin}, \textit{In Living Color}, are consistent with the early images of television and film such as the “Buffoon” and “Coon.” Yet, some shows do offer new images and categories, which could suggest that sitcoms have moved beyond black stereotypes even though the shows are of a comedic genre. Several assumptions can be made as to why negative imageries of African Americans continue to exist on television:

1.) Because of the lack of financial support from networks, advertising agencies, and audiences for dramas, African-American comedy-based shows make more money than African-American centered dramas.

\textsuperscript{33} Ani, 186.


\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
2.) African Americans that appear in comical situations are more satisfying to both white and African-American audiences because comedy reinforces superiority in the white imagination and is more comfortable for African Americans to laugh at themselves.

3.) African-American television dramas are not financially supported by advertisers or networks and are inevitably canceled.

4.) African-American television dramas are minimal; thus, African-American writers, producers, and actors are given limited opportunities in the entertainment industry.

Another permeating question is why are African-American actors more suitable for comedy rather than drama? In comedy, the audience feels superior to the characters; in drama, the audience feels equal to the characters, and in tragedy, the audience feels inferior to the characters. Therefore, it could be argued that comedy provides the best platform of entertainment since African Americans are considered by the dominant white culture.

The predominance of the white gaze on television serves as a theoretical context of images on African-American sitcoms. According to bell hooks, the white gaze refers to the stereotypes created by whites to promote their own dominance. By characterizing African Americans as the other, whites presume their own superiority. Hooks states that stereotypes are exaggerated anomalies:

Stereotypes however inaccurate are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is, but to invite and encourage pretense. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretense that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken or are not allowed.36

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In addition, the white gaze goes back to the tradition of minstrelsy, where whites created comical exaggerations and distortions of African Americans. Another implication suggests that African Americans appear nonthreatening in comical situations and portraiture. The whole inquiry of the social construction of images in the media and more specifically television sitcoms also hinges on the idea of race and stereotypical myths. Henry Louis Gates argues that whites have romanticized African-American culture and have done little to reverse notions of certain “black” attributes as unchanging, natural, and instinctual. Nevertheless, the media perpetuates the beliefs that whites have about African Americans. The media is the arena where ideologies are both produced and transformed. Images on television sitcoms often feed into the realm of mythical perception of African Americans.

Today, African-American images on sitcoms still use some of the racial stereotypes; however, the images are not overtly demeaning. Moreover, many of the sitcoms in early television and today possess mediated messages, which suggest that there is an underlying meaning of the sitcom, rather than the intent of presenting comical formations or stereotypes. In sitcoms, African-American actors use a form of entertainment that has historical manifestations in minstrelsy. However, there are other elements that exist within the context of the sitcoms that could possibly indicate that the messages carried out in the shows varies from the intent that the actors, creators, writers, and producers originally visualized. For example, Martin always depicts the main character, Martin as a “Coon” and “Buffoon”; however, Martin is a staunch businessman who values his community and intimate relationships with his girlfriend/wife, Gina, as
well as his group of friends. In addition, *In Living Color* constantly made humorous critiques on African-American culture. Episodes of “Homey the Clown,” “Wanda,” “Riding Ms. Daisy,” “The Wrath of Farrakhan,” and “Men on Film” all used stereotypes. Keenan Wayans defended his series arguing that he took stereotypes and ridiculed them to the point that they would not be perceived as real, therefore destroying preconceived notions about African Americans. Even today, shows such as *Girlfriends*, *The Parkers*, and *Moesha* all exist in comedic form, but offer progressive images and messages which are starting to eradicate black stereotypes. It could be argued that black writers, actors, and producers see and use stereotypes in a different way. African-American sitcoms, thus, could be seen as a genre of folklore, by which comedy is used as a form of resistance. We see this idea in the examples of the *Jeffersons* and the *Hughleys*. George Jefferson and D.L. Hughley use comedy to reveal the beliefs and perceptions that whites have of African Americans.

In this chapter, the ideas of media scholars are discussed to provide a foundation and rationale of the existence of stereotypes of African Americans on television sitcoms. The texts presented speak to each other, providing both similar and contrasting views of the images of blacks on television. The conceptual framework seeks to explain why questionable images exist. To propel the research to a new level, intended and mediated messages will be interpreted by the researcher, which many media scholars do not include in their discussion on black images on sitcoms.

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CHAPTER FOUR
METHODOLOGY

I. Research Design

The research design for this study was a content analysis performed on selected television sitcoms, which aired from the 1950s – 2001. A content analysis was chosen as the research methodology for several reasons. First, it can reveal an understanding of the television images of African Americans depicted in African American sitcoms. Secondly, it proved to be the most appropriate method for examining the research questions, which are:

1. Are black stereotypes used to depict characters on African-American-themed sitcoms?
2. What mediated messages prevail as a result of the images portrayed on television sitcoms?
3. Are the characters on African-American-themed sitcoms moving away from traditional black stereotypes, and does this progression lead to new categorization of African-American images on television sitcoms?

There are many definitions of content analysis. Content analysis is any systemic procedure devised to examine the content of recorded information. Content analysis can also be defined as a research technique for making replaceable and valid references from
data on to their context. Content Analysis is objective, i.e., the researcher’s personal idiosyncrasies and biases should not enter into the findings.

Many content analyses are reality checks in which the portrayal of a certain group, phenomenon, trait or characteristic is assessed against a stand taken from real life. The congruence between the media presentation and the actual situation is then discussed. Ever growing numbers of content analyses have focused on exploring the studied counter-stereotypes and black television images in the 1920s. In this research study, the content analysis explored the images of African Americans in television sitcoms.

In many instances, studies using content analysis are conducted to assess changes in media policy toward a targeted group, to make inferences about the media’s responsiveness to demands for better coverage, or to document social trends. For the purpose of this research however, a content analysis was used to examine selected sitcoms for evidence of the use of racial stereotypes, the existence of mediated messages and to investigate the possibilities of new construction of images of blacks in African American sitcoms.

The use of content analysis is relatively new.¹ The best known example is cultivation analysis in which the dominant message and themes in media content are documented by systematic procedures and a separate study of the audience is conducted to determine whether these messages are similar attitudes among heavy media users.

The following steps were utilized in conducting the content analysis used in this study:

1. Formulation of the research question.

In this study:

a. Are black stereotypes used to depict characters in African-American-themed sitcoms?

b. What mediated messages prevail as a result of the images portrayed on television sitcoms?

c. Are the characters on African-American-themed sitcoms moving away from traditional black stereotypes, and does this movement lead to new categorizations of the images of African Americans on television sitcoms?

2. Defining the population in question: In this study: selected African-American-themed television sitcoms from 1950-2001. See Table 1.

3. Selecting an appropriate sample from the population: In this study: selected episodes from these sitcoms.

4. Constructing categories of the content to be analyzed.

5. Establishing a quantification system.

6. Code the content according to established definitions. (See sample code sheet in Appendix A.)

7. Analyzing the collected data.

There are limitations to using content analysis. The findings of a particular content analysis are limited to the framework of the categories and the definitions used in the analysis. Another potential limitation is a lack of message relevant to the research. In addition, the researcher of this study is not surveying or interviewing the viewing
audience. For the purpose of this study, selected sitcoms were videotaped in order to code and categorize the content.

II. The Sample

Twenty-four (24)-selected sitcoms, which aired from 1950 - 2001, were chosen for analysis. The criteria for selection included: the show was a pivotal sitcom in television history. In addition, shows were selected based on the overall theme of the show or if the main title character was African American. (See Table 1 for the list of television sitcoms selected for analysis.)

III. Unit of Analysis

In this study, the unit of analysis was the racial stereotype of African-American images found in the sitcoms under investigation. Based on the categories provided by media scholars such as Bogle and Dates, the following definitions were used to examine the occurrence of stereotypes in African-American sitcoms.

\[
\begin{align*}
A &= \text{Mammy} \\
B &= \text{Coon} \\
C &= \text{Tom} \\
D &= \text{Pickaninny} \\
E &= \text{Brutal Buck} \\
F &= \text{Sapphire} \\
G &= \text{Uncle Remus} \\
H &= \text{Tragic Mulatto} \\
I &= \text{Black Superwoman} \\
J &= \text{Immature/ Ignorant Black Male}
\end{align*}
\]
A coding sheet was designed to classify the data, which allowed the research to record the existence of stereotype used to depict African Americans in African-American-themed shows or shows where the main title character of the show was an African American (even though the show may not have been black themed).

The following definitions were used.

a.) The Tom

Image of the Good Negro. Bogle suggests that toms are always chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, insulted, but they keep their faith and never turn against their masters. They remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and compassionate.²

b.) The Coon

Image of the no account-niggers, unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing except eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap or butchering the English language.³

c.) The Pickaninny

Historically refers to the black child, a harmless, screwball creation whose eyes popped and hair stood on end with the least excitement. The modern day Pickaninny refers to a dumb young person who lacks common sense.⁴

d.) The Uncle Remus

Image of the harmless friendly naïve black man, who usually was a wise comic.⁵

e.) The Tragic Mulatto

Usually fair-skinned, trying to pathetically pass for white. This image is a sympathetic character because of her biracialness.⁶

f.) The Mammy

Image of the African-American woman who is usually loud independent, overweight, asexual, and dutifully serves her white family.⁷


³ Ibid., 5.

⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Ibid.
g.) The Brutal Black Buck  Refers to the oversexed, savage, violent black man who lusts after white women.\(^8\) The modern day buck is the black man who is considered to have many women and makes sexual advances towards them.

h.) Sapphire  Derivative of the Mammy image, which suggests that African-American women are bossy, smart-mouthed, bitchy, independent, and usually creates conflict with African-American men. A modern day depiction includes characteristics of a “gold digger,” a woman who is only concerned about acquiring and maintain a male suitor’s wealth.

i.) Black Superwoman  Overnurturing black Female; Makes a way out of no way. Often serves as a buffer for their men and children.

j.) Immature/Ignorant Black Male  Behavior of black men acting childlike, ignorant, and stubborn, but usually needs guidance from black women.

IV. Procedure  

The researcher viewed the selected episodes of the sample the using the code sheet to determine and document the presence of stereotypical images, and mediated messages.
Audre Lorde has stated that "The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."¹ This statement implies that there is a need for rejection of the master’s stereotypical images of blacks that we see when we look at black sitcoms. This study, therefore, investigated mediated messages in African-American sitcoms.

A question, not answered by this research, but which needs addressing is, “Why do these sitcoms overall seem to appeal to African Americans regardless of class?” Or do the sitcoms just provide humorous ways of looking at life or do they allow blacks to remember an earlier period of what black life was—what the black and white gaze perceive it to be- or what still is? Bogle and others have studied blacks in the mass media as consisting of only negative images—such as the “Mammy,” the “Tragic Mulatto,” the “Coon,” “Sambo,” and the “Buffoon.”

However, this research offers another paradigm—that of mediated messages. In other words, are blacks responding to the intended negative message or are they

responding to another unconscious message? Thus, this investigation of the selected sitcoms revealed certain facts which do not eliminate the negative impact of the stereotypes and myths on the lives of black Americans but do require another reading of the significance and possible meanings attached to them by the black gaze.

The researcher acknowledges, along with Bogle and other experts in the field, that the negative images imply that African Americans, in spite of the significant social, political and economic gains, still do not possess the qualities needed to fit into mainstream American society. Blacks are also portrayed as being one-dimensional, that is, poor, living in inner city, one-parent family and unemployed. It has been the black sitcoms, which have proven to be more successful on television than documentaries or dramas. Apparently, the black and white gaze fall upon the visual presentation, perhaps for different reasons, or perhaps for different reasons, which have made certain shows successful. Thus, the visual analysis of the selected black sitcoms has revealed some interesting facts in spite of the negative images.

Overall, the findings indicate that while white male executives and producers intended to demonstrate in most instances the negative and, thus, inferiority of blacks, just the opposite may be occurring with the black audience. Since the researcher did not survey or interview blacks that watch sitcoms, the analysis is based primarily on a content analysis of the selected black sitcoms. It is apparent that the findings embrace the intersection categories of family, location, occupation and characters. As much as
possible, the findings will be discussed examining each of the aforementioned categories; however, it will be necessary occasionally to discuss the categories together.

The Family

Two major media events have impacted the creation and presentation of African-American families on television. The first is the report by Daniel Moynihan, The Negro Family: The Case for National Action and the 1986 documentary, The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America moderated by Bill Moyers. Both presentations have portrayed African-American families as defined by Ziegler as a "symptom of society." Both media presentations viewed the black family as nonfunctional, a matriarchy, and in a state of crisis. "They create a backdrop that says African Americans have no family values, represent a crisis for America and need national action and attention" (Dickerson, 84). The works of Moynihan and Moyers continue or expand the myths and stereotypes indicative of the African-American families.

According to Peters previous research on the black family has focused on 1) deviancy, 2) pathology and/or 3) uncontrolled sexuality. Ebony Magazine in its 1990 edition identifies the following ten (10) myths given on black families:

1. Raw and uncontrolled sex . . . is at the root of the black family problem.
2. The root cause of the problem . . . is loose morals.
3. Blacks lack a family tradition and came to America without a sense of morality and a background of stable sexual relationships.


4. The bonds of the black family were destroyed in slavery.
5. The black family collapsed after emancipation.
6. The black family collapsed after the Great Migration to the North.
7. The black family is a product of white paternalism and government welfare.
8. The black family has always been a matriarchy characterized by strong and domineering women and weak and absent men.
10. The history of the black family is a history of fussing and fighting by hard-hearted men and heartless women.

However, Robert Hill has declared that there are strong traits held by black families that are in many instances carryovers from Africa. According to Hill, African-American families demonstrate such traits as strong work ethic, strong achievement orientation, strong kinship ties, strong religious orientation and strong flexibility of roles. These orientations proved prevalent in such selected black sitcoms as *Good Times, Give Me a Break, Julia, The Cosby Show, Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and *Family Matters*. This acknowledgment of strengths rather than weaknesses in the sitcoms is not intended to eliminate the devastating effects of the negative images and stereotypes presented by the mass media about African-American families.

While *Good Times and Give Me a Break* are inner-city portrayals of black families, two different models of black families are presented. *Good Times*, goes against myths 8 and 9 as presented above. *Good Times* represents a two-parent family living in the ghetto, while *Give Me a Break* represents a single-parent family with a father who makes periodic visits and has a relationship with his children. In both instances, however, the families are not on welfare, and while income is limited, the parents are gainfully employed.

On the other hand, *Julia* presents a picture of a single-mother (she is widowed), who is a nurse and may be classified as middle-class. The *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*
presents two diametrically opposed class situations. The father and uncle in the *Fresh Prince* lives in Bel Air, a wealthy section of California, has a butler and whose three children attend private school. They are joined by the father's nephew from Philadelphia and a single mother. He is sent to live with the family in an effort to ensure that his life will not be limited by living in the projects in Philadelphia. This show also represents the orientation of strong kinship ties.

*Family Matters* represents the working class. The father of the family is a policeman, the mother also works outside the home. Living in this household are a son and a daughter, a mother-in-law and a sister-in-law with her children. This arrangement is an example of strong kinship ties, and the notion of the extended family. Also a part of this family is the next door young man, who could be described as a fictive son in the earlier episodes. *The Cosby Show* shows an upper-middle class family with children. They live in an upbeat neighborhood.

All of the shows, regardless of family structure, exhibit the strengths discussed by Robert Hill. All of the families are achievement oriented, exhibit a strong work ethic, and demonstrate role flexibility in that the fathers can cook, clean and help with the rearing of the children. Further, they all exhibit strong kinship ties. The only orientation mentioned by Hill that is not exhibited is religion. The other trait that is demonstrated by *Give Me a Break, and Good Times* specifically, is legacy given to black families which states that “black folks, especially mothers, will make a way out of no way.” In all the shows, the parents are interested in providing positive opportunities for their children, “instilling pride in their children, and enhancing their own self-
The images presented by television, while presenting in some instances such characters as "The Mammy" and the "Buffoon" also present families who are the opposite of the ten myths of black families. This does not appear to be the intent, but the mediated message of the sitcoms. These are adaptive strengths, which certainly are contrary to the images presented by the media.

**Occupations**

In most of the sitcoms, blacks are gainfully employed; that is, women are not standing around on the street corner or standing in welfare lines. While the negative images are still prevalent, the fact is that people are working and some are successful entrepreneurs. Martin's portrayal of the character touches on buffoonery, the mediated message is that one does not have to accept second best.

**Residence**

In African-American sitcoms, location is a very important indicator of the sitcom. In most sitcoms, the place of residence is in an African-American neighborhood, whether inner city or suburb. The location, as indicated in this study, is primarily an upscale neighborhood in the city.

**Results**

Twenty-four (24) sitcoms were selected for investigation to determine whether stereotypical images are used to depict African-American characters. The sitcoms selected are presented in Table 1.

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4 Dickerson, 137.
Out of 24 shows, 18 shows reviewed were black-themed (B.T.), 4 shows had an African-American character, and 2 shows were a combination of black-themed and main character shows. (See Table 2.)

Out of 94 episodes reviewed in this study, 107 stereotypes were found. (See Table 3.)

For familial orientation, categories were constructed to investigate how many stereotypes were found in sitcoms with nuclear families, single parents, singles, and nontraditional families. The nuclear family is one that contains a husband and wife or husband, wife, and children. The single-parent household refers to a nonmarried parent of 1 or more children. The singles category is the young professional nonmarried characters. Nontraditional families refer to children being adopted by white parents or two single parents raising biological children, i.e., Sister, Sister. The following results were found: 11 out of the 24 sitcoms were characterized as nuclear families. Fifty-nine (59) stereotypes were found in the nuclear family category. Two (2) shows were in the single-parent category, which contained 10 stereotypes. There were 8 shows in the singles category that contained 26 stereotypes. And finally, 3 shows were in the non-traditional families' category, which contained 4 stereotypes. The nuclear family category contained the most stereotypes. (See Table 4.)

Occupational categories were constructed to investigate whether occupation had any bearing on the stereotypes found. Six (6) out of 24 shows had professional main characters among which 9 stereotypes were found, 3 out of 24 shows were in the servant category and 17 stereotypes were found; 6 shows possessed entrepreneurs and 43 stereotypes were found; 2 shows were in the blue collar category and 12 stereotypes
were found; One show was white collar with 8 stereotypes found; and 5 shows were of
the student occupation with 14 stereotypes found in the show. The entrepreneur
category contains the most stereotypes. (See Table 5.)

Residence category was constructed to examine whether location determined the
number of stereotypes in sitcoms. (See Table 6.) Two out of 24 shows (8%) were
depicted in the projects and 22 (21%) stereotypes were found. Five out of the 24
sitcoms (2%) were depicted in the suburbs with a total of 12 stereotypes (11%). Twelve
sitcoms (50%) were depicted in upscale apartments or houses in the city, which
contained 35 (33%) stereotypes. Four shows were portrayed in the “hood,” which was
17% and 36 (34%) stereotypes were found. One (4%) show possessed college life in
the dormitories, which had 4 (4%) stereotypes. Most shows reviewed were depicted in
upscale apartments or houses in the inner city. Sitcoms with the most stereotypes were
in the “hood” residence category.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Sitcom</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Network</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Beulah</td>
<td>1950-53</td>
<td>ABC</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Amos 'N Andy</td>
<td>1951-53</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>1968-71</td>
<td>NBC</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Good Times</td>
<td>1974-79</td>
<td>NBC</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The Jeffersons</td>
<td>1975-85</td>
<td>NBC</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Diff'rent Strokes</td>
<td>1979-86</td>
<td>ABC</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Webster</td>
<td>1983-87</td>
<td>ABC</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Gimme A Break</td>
<td>1981-87</td>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The Cosby Show</td>
<td>1984-92</td>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>A Different World</td>
<td>1987-93</td>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Family Matters</td>
<td>1989-98</td>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Frank's Place</td>
<td>1987-88</td>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>1993-98</td>
<td>FOX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>The Steve Harvey Show</td>
<td>1996-</td>
<td>WB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Living Single</td>
<td>1993-98</td>
<td>FOX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Wayans Bros.</td>
<td>1995-99</td>
<td>WB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>The Parenthood</td>
<td>1996-99</td>
<td>WB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Moesha</td>
<td>1996-</td>
<td>UPN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>The Hughleys</td>
<td>1998-</td>
<td>UPN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>The Parkers</td>
<td>1999-</td>
<td>UPN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>PJ's</td>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>FOX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Girlfriends</td>
<td>2000-</td>
<td>UPN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>My Wife and Kids</td>
<td>2001-</td>
<td>ABC</td>
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Table 2.
Number of Episodes Reviewed in Selected Sitcoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Type of Show</th>
<th>Sitcom</th>
<th># of Episodes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Beulah</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Amos 'N Andy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Good Times</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>The Jeffersons</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>Diff'rent Strokes</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>Webster</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>Gimme A Break</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>BT/MC</td>
<td>The Cosby Show</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>A Different World</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Family Matters</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Frank's Place</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Sister Sister</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>The Steve Harvey Show</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Living Single</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Wayans Bros.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>The Parenthood</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Moesha</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>BT/MC</td>
<td>The Hughleys</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>The Parkers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>PJ's</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Girlfriends</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>My Wife and Kids</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key:

A=Mammy  F=Sapphire  G=Uncle Remus  H=Tragic Mulatto  I-Black Superwoman  J=Immature/ignorant Black Male

BT= Black-Themed Show
MC=Main Character
Table 3. Stereotypes Found in Episodes of Selected Sitcoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Show</th>
<th>Reviewed # of Episodes</th>
<th>Stereotype Found</th>
<th>Total Number of Stereotypes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beulah</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amos ‘n’ Andy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B,F,C</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>B,F</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>B,F</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>B,F</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Times</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B,J,I</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>B,J</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>B,J</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>B,J</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>B,J</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Jeffersons</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B,F,J,I</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>B,F,J,I</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>B,F,J,I</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>B,F,J,I</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>B,F,J,I</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diff’rent Strokes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webster</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gimme A Break!</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cosby Show</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Different World</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>J</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Matters</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank’s Place</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B,J,I</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>B,J,I</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>B,J</td>
<td>2</td>
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Table 3 cont’d)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Show</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Overall Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sister Sister</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Steve Harvey Show</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayans Bros.</td>
<td>B, I, J</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Parenthood</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moesha</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hughleys</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Parkers</td>
<td>D, F</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ’s</td>
<td>I, J</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriends</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Wife and Kids</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>107</td>
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Table 4.
Family Orientation

N=24 Shows   () = Stereotypes Found

<table>
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<th>Nuclear</th>
<th>Single Parent</th>
<th>Singles</th>
<th>Non-Traditional</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amos 'N Andy (9)</td>
<td>Julia (0)</td>
<td>Martin (8)</td>
<td>Webster (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Times (12)</td>
<td>Parkers (10)</td>
<td>Beulah (2)</td>
<td>Diff'rent Strokes (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffersons (20)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Frank's Place (0)</td>
<td>Sister Sister (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cosby Show (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td>A Different World (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayans Bros. (9)</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Steve Harvey Show (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Parenthood (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Living Single (0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moesha (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Girlsfriends (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hughleys (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gimme A Break (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ's</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Wife, and Kids</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Matters (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total 11 ((59)</strong></td>
<td><strong>2 (10)</strong></td>
<td><strong>7 (26)</strong></td>
<td><strong>3 (4)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.  
Main Character(s) Occupation in Selected Sitcoms

N=24 shows   () = Stereotypes Found

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Entrepreneur</th>
<th>Servant</th>
<th>Blue Collar</th>
<th>White Collar</th>
<th>Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cosby (0)</td>
<td>My Wife and Kids (0)</td>
<td>Beulah (2)</td>
<td>Family Matters (4)</td>
<td>Martin (8)</td>
<td>Webster (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia (0)</td>
<td>Amos 'N Andy (9)</td>
<td>Gimme A Break (3)</td>
<td>PJs (8)</td>
<td>Diff'rent Strokes (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriends(5)</td>
<td>Jeffersons (20)</td>
<td>Good Times (12)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sister Sister (0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Harvey (4)</td>
<td>Frank's Place (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Moesha (0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Single (0)</td>
<td>Wayans Bros. (9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Parkers (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenthood (0)</td>
<td>Hughleys (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6 (9)</td>
<td>6 (43)</td>
<td>3 (17)</td>
<td>2 (12)</td>
<td>1 (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. Resident Location of Selected Sitcoms

Table 6 (a)
Residence in the Projects

N= 24 Total Shows
N= 107 Stereotypes found in 94 Episodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Show</th>
<th># of Stereotypes Found</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good Times</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJs</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total = 2 (8%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>22 (21%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 (b)
Residence in House in the Suburbs

N= 24 Total Shows
N= 107 Stereotypes found in 94 Episodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Show</th>
<th># of Stereotypes Found</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Matters</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gimme A Break</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hughleys</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me, My Wife, and Kids</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moesha</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total = 5 (21%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>12 (11%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 (c)  
Residence in Upscale Apartment or House in the City

N= 24 Total Shows  
N= 107 Stereotypes found in 94 Episodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Show</th>
<th># of Stereotypes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beulah</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosby Show</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diff'rent Strokes</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank's Place</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriends</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffersons</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent'hood</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister, Sister</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Harvey Show</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webster</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total = 12 (50%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>35 (33%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 6 (d)
Residence in Apartment or House in the “Hood”

N= 24 Total Shows  
N= 107 Stereotypes found in 94 Episodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Show</th>
<th># of Stereotypes Found</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amos 'N Andy</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parkers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayans Bros.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total = 4 (17%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>36 (34%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6 (e)
Residence in College Dormitory

N= 24 Total Shows  
N= 107 Stereotypes found in 94 Episodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Show</th>
<th># of Stereotypes Found</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Different World</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total = 1 (4%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>4 (4%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER SIX

REALITY VS. REPRESENTATION OF STEREOTYPES IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN SITCOMS

A. Episodes of Selected Sitcoms

The images of African Americans on television sitcoms have been on a large scale one dimensional and yet, stereotypical. Many of the images seen on television are elements of historical stereotypes that were used by whites to invalidate the humanity of African Americans. The images are embedded in a tradition of minstrelsy where African Americans were depicted as “Mammies,” “Coons,” “Toms,” “Jezebels,” and “Bucks”. Because of these stereotypes, many of the assumptions, perceptions, and ideas permeate on television. In this chapter, the deconstruction of stereotypical images of African Americans on sitcoms, the mediated messages, and new categorizations of the sitcoms will be analyzed. For examination purposes, tables have constructed to provide the evidence of the content analysis of the existing stereotypes on African-American sitcoms. A select few of the mentioned sitcoms do not consume the stereotypes that are typically characterized in African American situation comedies. Sitcoms such as Julia, The Cosby Show, Frank’s Place, and Living Single present African Americans in ways that do not subscribe to racist stereotypes. Even in descriptions given in the sitcoms that contain racist stereotypes, there are underlying messages and meanings that must be interpreted. In this discussion, new meanings and ideas will offer insight to the spectrum of the mediated messages that result in the images portrayed on television sitcoms.
The Beulah Show (1950-53)

The first sitcom to have an African American as the central subject was The Beulah Show. Beulah first aired as a radio show, which starred Marlon Hurt and later Bob Curly and later, Hattie McDaniel. The story told of an African-American maid who was employed by a white family, the Hendersons. Empowered by a deep hearty laugh, big smile, and a full figure, Beulah was appeasing to the white audience because she exemplified an African American being in her place. The Beulah Radio Show evolved into television in 1950 and starred Ethel Waters as Beulah, Butterfly McQueen as Oriole, Percy Harris as Bill, William Post, Jr., Ginger Jones, and Clifford Sales. Donald Bogle notes that Beulah was not different from radio:

Usually the show opened with some pitchy comment made by Beulah.
‘She spends most of her time in the kitchen,’ Beulah said of herself at the opening of one episode. ‘But never seems to know what the cooking.’ Then she smiled broadly for the camera. ‘If marriages are made in heaven,’ Beulah lamented on another episode ‘my guardian angel’s sho’ been loafing all on the job.’ Then she burst into laughter. ‘Don’t let nobody tell you I’m in the market for husband,’ said Beulah about her love life. ‘Of course I would be. But they don’t sell husbands in a market.’

The “Mammy” image is repeatedly portrayed on The Beulah Show. Beulah was a popular image for society, whose life was dedicated to the betterment of the white family for whom she worked. On one particular episode, Beulah’s employers, the Hendersons suggest to Beulah that the family eat sandwiches on Saturday nights instead of a full cooked meal. Beulah responds by declaring that she will do anything except “feeding her family sandwiches on Saturday night!”

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The asexuality of the "Mammy" image on *The Beulah Show* further suggests that African-American women willingly give up their sexuality for the greater good of the white family. Bogle notes the "Mammy" icon must be desexualized in order to not be a threat to the structure of the white family:

Lest she appear as a threat or rival to the white women she works for, the mammy, of course, has to be desexed; thus her large size and darker color. Her asexuality also makes her an ideal mother surrogate.³

The "Mammy" stereotype is also an interesting component in the social construction of black sexuality because it is juxtaposed to the elements of white womanhood, i.e., weak, delicate, and silent.⁴ In addition, Ross notes that the "Mammy" image embodies a dichotomy of the myths of black womanhood: the faithful servant, earth mother, and nurturer of white families, while at the same time, ignoring her own.

The elements of the "Mammy" image are constructed in *The Beulah Show*. Viewers never see Beulah have an intimate relationship with a man, nor does the audience see her interact with her own family. What is prevalent to the audience is that Beulah's main priority is to be a dutiful servant who is proud of her work and delighted to stay in her place. In *The Beulah Show*, the intent of the show was to suggest that African-American women are happy and content with serving whites. The show gives the idea that the ideal place for African Americans is that of subservience and inferiority. By placing Beulah as the "Outsider Within," her role reminds both white and African Americans of their perceived status in America. Collins notes that:

Domestic work allowed African-American women to see white elites, both actual and aspiring, from perspectives largely obscured from Black men and from these

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³ Bogle, 22.

groups themselves. In their white families, Black women not only performed domestic duties but frequently formed strong ties with the children they nurtured and with the employers themselves. On one level, this insider relationship was satisfying to all concerned. But on another level these Black women knew that they could never belong to their white "families," that they were economically exploited workers and thus would remain outsiders. The result was an outsider within stance, a peculiar marginality that stimulated a special Black women's perspective.5

The "Outsider Within" concept can be applied to Beulah because she is a black domestic being made to feel as though she is an integral part of the Henderson family, yet she is not. Her only legitimate role is to dutifully and graciously serve her family. We do, however, see a jolly woman who seems content with status. It is ironic though, that during the 1950s in which Beulah aired, African Americans were protesting laws, which prohibited them from full protection under the law. It should be noted that African-American women were employed as maids during the 1950s. African American had to make a means for supporting their families, even if it meant being the servants of whites. Perhaps the problems with media critics who analyze Beulah, is that the sitcom does not show an inclusive scope of the character-meaning that the show never suggested that Beulah was tired of working for whites or her overall predicament in a racist society. The sitcom only suggests that Beulah was joyous and did anything and everything possible to ensure the comfort of her family.

**Amos ‘n’ Andy (1951-1953)**

The first sitcom to cast African Americans in an all black sitcom was *Amos ‘N Andy*. Like *The Beulah Show*, the show had previously been a popular radio sitcom created by two white men, Freeman Godsend and Charles Cornell. The show centered on

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5 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of*
the lives of two Southern African-American men, Amos Jones and Andrew "Hogg" Brown who migrated from the South to Chicago and Harlem. Alvin Childress portrayed Amos, the role of Andy was played by Spencer Williams, Tim More played George "Kingfish" Stevens, Sapphire was played by Ernestine Wade. The show premiered on CBS on June 28, 1951.

The first episode, "Kingfish get drafted," told the story of Kingfish, who is then his 60s get drafted into the army. Kingfish is proud that he will get to serve his country. He later finds out that the draft letter was for his son. To not undergo embarrassment, he goes to enlist and is told that he is too old. He thus fakes his induction into the Army and Sapphire and Maple verbally admonish him. Another episode focused on Kingfish playing matchmaker to rid his household of his mother-in-law. To create the romance, he forges letters from "Mama" and the supposedly rich millionaire. To Kingfish's surprise, the millionaire turns out to be a con who marries women to extort money from them. Kingfish goes through countless episodes so that Mama and Sapphire will not find out.

The image that routinely pervaded through the characters of Amos, Andy, and Kingfish is the "Coon." The "Coon" presents African Americans, men in particular, as amusement objects and buffoons. "Coons" are always the subjects of the jokes. In addition, the "Coon" is presented as trifling, lazy, unreliable, and botches the English language. Media scholars such as Donald Bogle, Karen Ross, and Jeanette Dates argue that Amos 'n' Andy possesses stereotypical images because it characterizes African-American men as buffoons. What is most interesting about Amos 'n' Andy was that it did present entrepreneurs, lawyers, and professionals on the sitcom. In this sense, the show would be considered pivotal because no other show of this nature existed on television.

_Empowerment_ (New York: Routledge, 1990), 11.
Most media scholars ignore the fact that the sitcom centered on an African-American community. In many ways, the comedy was no different than *I Love Lucy*. Many of the antics are similar. Amos and Kingfish often found themselves in comical dilemmas, by which they had to find solutions. Often, these dilemmas and solutions opted a comedic form.

African-American women are presented as “Sapphires.” Sapphire in particular was used to emasculate and debunk the strength of African-American men. bell hooks offers an insightful thought on the “Sapphire” character:

She was even then the backdrop, foil. She was a bitch-nag. She was there to soften images of black men, to make them seem vulnerable, easygoing, funny, and unthreatening to a white audience. She was there as a man in drag, a castrating bitch, as someone to be lied to, someone to be tricked, and someone the white and black audience could hate.6

The presence of Sapphire is the main stereotype that is damaging in *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. By positioning black women as angry emasculators, the sitcom sends the message that African-American women do not validate or respect their men. The parent (Sapphire) child (male Coon) relationships between men and women on *Amos ‘n’ Andy* suggest that there is a gender imbalance of attitudes and roles that exist in the lives of black men and women.

**Julia (1968-71)**

The Civil Rights Movement and the socioeconomic plight towards racial integration transcended into themes in television sitcoms. *Julia* told the story of Julia Baker, who after her husband is killed in Vietnam; she begins a new life for herself and her son. Julia finds employment at Astro Space Industries and lives in an integrate
apartment building. The show was criticized because it avoided real issues concerning African Americans and racism. *Julia*, however, did present African-American women in a professional environment rather than that of a domestic. *Julia* gives the notion that African Americans had fully and successfully integrated into white America. *Julia* did not possess any of the historical racist stereotypes and avoided issues of racism and poverty, which were realities for many African Americans during the 1960s. *Julia* was probably a “breath of fresh air” for many viewers. In an era where the Civil Rights Movement was at its height, producers and writers wanted to create a show that was devoid of stereotypical imageries. *Julia* was created by Hal Kanter (white) to show an African-American woman successfully integrating into mainstream society. In essence, the show also intended to suggest that all African-American single mothers do not have to depend on welfare to survive. No longer did viewers see a domestic or a buffoon, but an independent professional woman with a substantial career. The problem with Julia was that it lacked the presence of the African-American husband/father role. When the show aired it was revealed that the father had been killed in Vietnam. The absence of the black husband and father would promote the impression that African-American single/female headed households are more acceptable and less threatening than a two-parent household. Thus, the mediated message of Julia could imply that African-American women must rely on white men in the absence of African-American men.

**Good Times** (1974-79)

*Good Times* was a spin-off show of the hit series *Maude*. In *Maude*, actor Ester Rolle portrayed the black maid/housekeeper named Florida. The cast of *Good

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6 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press), 120.
Times included Florida; her unemployed but always looking-for-work husband, James (John Amos); their teenage son, J.J. (Jimmie Walker); a daughter, Thelma (BernNadette Stanis); and a younger son, Michael (Ralph Carter). The Evan's neighbor, a fortyish woman named Willona (Ja'net Dubois), made frequent appearances. Janet Jackson (of the Jackson family fame) joined the cast later as Willona's adopted daughter. Good Times earned its place in television history for a number of reasons. The program is significant for its decidedly different view, not only of African-American family life, but American family life in general. Unlike the innocuous images served up in early television shows such as Father Knows Best and Julia, Good Times interjected relevancy and realism into prime-time television by dealing with the pressing issues of the day.

Good Times was also noteworthy in its portrayal of an African-American family attempting to negotiate the vicissitudes of life in a high-rise tenement apartment in an urban slum—the first show to tackle such a scenario with any measure of realism. The program exploited, with comic relief, such volatile subject matter as inflation, unemployment and racial bigotry. Along with The Jeffersons, Good Times was one of first television sitcoms featuring a mostly black cast to appear since the controversial Amos 'n' Andy show had been canceled some twenty years prior.

The show also highlighted the good parenting skills of James and Florida. In spite of their difficult situation, they never shirked on their responsibility to teach values and morality to their children. The younger son Michael was thoughtful, intelligent, and fascinated with African-American history. He frequently participated in protest marches for good causes. J.J. was an aspiring artist who dreamed of lifting his family from the
clutches of poverty. In one episode the family's last valuable possession, the television set, is stolen from J.J. on his way to the pawnshop to obtain a loan that would pay the month's rent. But somehow the Evans family prevailed. Their ability to remain steadfast in the face of difficult odds was an underlying theme of the show.

The overall theme of Good Times brought to light the strength of an African-American family struggling against the wiles of poverty, unemployment, and racism, however, through the character of J.J. (Jimmy Walker), the "Coon" resurfaced yet, again. With his wide toothy grin, bright and ill-fitting clothes, ludicrous strut, and bug-eyes, J.J. became a featured character with his trademark exclamation,"DY-NO-MITE!" J.J. lied, stole, and was barely literate, often acting immature and younger than his younger brother Michael. More and more episodes were focused on his exploits. Forgotten were Michael's scholastic success, James' search for a job and anything resembling family values.

In addition to the "Coon" image was the portrayal of Florida as the over nurturing/care taking black woman. On many occasions, Florida is depicted as a woman who must give up her personal identity and goals for the sake of her family. For example, Bogle suggests that when Florida decides to get her high-school diploma, her husband James begins to feel emasculated because she begins to correct his grammar. After heated arguments on the issue, Florida considers not continuing her education and James decides that they should both get their education. In any case, the role of Florida and James justifies the notion of black male emasculation in black male/female relationships and how African-American women must give up themselves for the sake of the male ego. In many ways, Ester Rolle's character is not stereotypical, but typical -
a mother who makes sacrifices for the sake of her family, which fulfills the myth of the superwoman.

Even with a newly fashioned, employed, and mature-acting J.J. character, ratings for *Good Times* plummeted. With some concessions, Rolle re-joined the cast in 1978, but the program failed and the series was canceled. The program went on to enjoy a decade of success in syndication. *Good Times*, with its success and its criticism remains an important program in television history. As the product of the highly successful Lear/Yorkin team it stretched the boundaries of television comedy, by invoking the realities that existed in black urban America. Even though J.J.’s character seemed to be a distraction, the overall theme of the show proved the show the strengths of the black family. In addition, *Good Times*, the first sitcom to focus on the struggles and triumphs of black family life in the ghetto, began to turn when J.J. became the main comical focus of the show because of his coon-like behavior. Although the intent of the sitcom was to suggest that all African Americans live in ghettos, the intelligence of Michael and the creativity of J.J. must not be overlooked. The show also revealed the intact black family, who supported each other through political, economic, and social struggles.

**The Jeffersons (1975-85)**

This controversial sitcom centered on Archie Bunker's neighbor, George Jefferson, whose successful dry cleaning business enabled him to move out of Queens, New York to the “deluxe apartments in the sky” in Manhattan. This sitcom celebrated African American upward mobility yet George Jefferson exhibited similar behavior just like his
white counterpart, Archie Bunker. For example, Archie Bunker would consistently
make racist, sexist, and homophobic statements, which revealed his attitude towards
social issues. George Jefferson exhibited the same behavior, especially towards whites.
The actions of George Jefferson in his relationships with his white neighbors could
suggest that he is responding to racism endured by African Americans. For example in
Black Looks, bell hooks argues that blacks remain silent about representation of
whiteness in the black imagination:

I want to focus on that representation of whiteness that is not formed in reaction to
stereotypes but emerges as a response to the traumatic pain and anguish that
remains a consequence of white racist domination, a psychotic state that informs
and shapes the way black folks see whiteness.7

George Jefferson is not silent when it comes to express his thought and views of
whiteness. In this sense, his character is revolutionary because it challenges the notion
that African Americans are silenced when it comes to giving voice to feelings regarding
white racism and domination.

George Jefferson was insistent on living upper classed. It seemed as though he was
arrogant, snobbish, petty, and insensitive. In addition, he jokingly ostracized whites
whenever the chance presented itself. He often referred to Tom Willis (Franklin Cover)
as honkey donkey and Mrs. Willis (Roxie Roker) as Mrs. Night, yet they were friends.
In addition, George Jefferson was always at odds with his maid, Florence. Again, the
relationship between the so-called blatantly ignorant African-American man and
“Sapphire” image reared its ugly head as it did with Kingfish and Sapphire in Amos 'n'
Andy. At first glance, it seems as though the Jeffersons was nothing more than a
collection of pre-existing stereotypes. Sherman Hemsley hopped and swayed his arms

hooks, 167.
that reminiscent of the comic “Coon.” Not to mention, his character was the joker.

As for Louise Jefferson, it seemed as though she played the long-suffering role, while serving as a buffer for her husband. Marla Gibbs’ portrayal of Florence relied heavily on the mammy image by being a comical servant. Yet, many of her actions personify the stereotype of the “Sapphire” because she repeatedly makes statements to George about his height, looks, and overall manhood. What is important about the Jefferson’s is that it presented African Americans owning their own businesses and living in the upper classed segment of society.

**Diff’rent Strokes (1979-86) and Webster (1983-87)**

The 1980s proved to be a pivotal point in the lives of African Americans. Blacks were starting to become more intertwined with mainstream America. Sitcoms reflected this notion. *Diff’rent Strokes* and *Webster* present the same notion that white parents are more suitable for black orphaned children. Both shows developed during a period where transracial adoptions were popular. The intent of the show invokes the idea that it is acceptable and normal for African-American children to lose their cultural identity because they are progressively moving into white culture. The “Pickaninny” image in the shows exploits both Gary Coleman’s and Emmanuel Lewis’ size. Their size also makes them adorable to the audience, but in many ways it is the brunt of the humor. Moreover, instead of removing black men from the household, writers and producers voided both black parents and made the children comfortable and assimilable in white culture.
On *Different Strokes* and *Webster*, orphaned, African-American boys were adopted by well-to-do white families. These children were culturally isolated and any attempts made by exterior black forces to provide insight with their upbringing were met with skepticism and disdain. Eventually, Arnold Drummond (Gary Coleman) and Webster Popadopoulous (Emmanuel Lewis) were fully assimilated into the mainstream. Webster and Arnold are not sent to live with family members after their parents death, which invokes the idea that African Americans are ill equipped to parent their own relatives.

The main stereotype depicted in both *Diff'rent Strokes* and *Webster* is an updated version of the “Pickaninny.” Bogle notes that “Arnold’s age-and his size-contributed to his effects. Viewers could accept this precious child speaking his mind and raising Cain.” In many instances Arnold would often retort “What you talkin' about Willis?” or to whomever the person he was speaking to. Historic Pickaninnies such as Farina and Stymie would often get into trouble or often make wisecrack remarks, being the brunt of any joke. Webster’s role was different from Arnold’s in that Webster was not presented as a smart-mouthed little person. However, it does suggest that producers to re-invent the pickananny image exploited his size, which was dwarfed.

While Webster was more moral, often helping his friends and usually having an important issue confronted in the show, *Diff'rent Strokes* showed African-American children as little tyrants who often needed to be reprimanded by their white parents. Nonetheless, both shows exemplified the idea that whites are better equipped to be parents of black children and that African Americans would rather have whites be the surrogate parents for their children.
Gimme a Break (1981-87)

*Gimme a Break!*, with Nell Carter, was a program that effectively resurrected the "Mammy" stereotype of the big, sassy, black woman who values the well-being of the white family she takes care of over her own personal and social life. Nell was a popular cultural descendant of Beulah's character. In one particular episode, Nell learns that she is to receive an inheritance from her deceased grandmother. Instead of moving away from the home, Nell decides to share her money with her white family. Nell also decides against marriage because she would rather pledge her allegiance to the white family. Nell Carter was criticized for playing the role because it reinforced the black stereotype of the "Mammy."

Nell possesses all of the ingredients of the image. She is overweight, asexual, loud-mouthed, and yet dutiful. Episode after episode reveals Nell's unyielding allegiance to her white family. *Gimme A Break!* recreated the "Mammy" stereotype in the 1980s. The intention of the sitcom was to again present black women as the caretakers and nurturers of white families. It seems as though through the role of the "Mammy," as with Beulah, her dignity and humanity is valid because she runs a white household and puts their well being over her own. As with *Webster* and *Different Strokes*, the mother of the family dies and her last wishes are for Nell to take care of her family. The notion of African Americans becoming an integral part of white families sends other messages that debunk the existence of the extended black family. Relatively, Nell Carter denies her own existence by sacrificing her personal life for the needs of her family. Like Beulah, *Gimme a Break!* devalues African-American womanhood by portraying them as comedic, yet humble servants. It is important to note that African-American actors and
actresses were given limiting roles due to the lack of African-American writers and producers.

The Cosby Show (1984-92) and Frank’s Place (1987-88)

The Cosby Show remains to this day the most popular African-American television series for African-Americans and whites. Bill Cosby, a comedian by profession, had decided to create a series unlike any other before. He wanted to present the humanistic qualities of African-American culture and for African-American culture to be paramount in the show, but not the basis of it. Critics of Cosby felt that the show was an inaccurate and completely fantasy-like world to white America. Some African-Americans complained that whites that were fans of the show would believe that poverty, inequity, and other social ills were no longer affecting the black community. The fact remains that Cosby resuscitated NBC and brought forth a new interpretation of African-American life on television. The Cosby Show revolutionized the image of African Americans on television. It presented a positive familial structure and humanistic ideas and perceptions of African-American culture. For example, one episode presented the importance of the elders in the family. For Bill Huxtable’s parents wedding anniversary, the Huxtable’s honor them with a celebration of dance and song. The reverence of elders is a vital element in the African-American community. In another episode, Cliff’s son, Theo, challenges his father on his education. Because he feels as though he does not need an education to survive in the world, Cliff gives Theo a lesson by moving his things out of his room and treats him like a tenant.

8 Bogle, 255-257
The Cosby Show was, however, based on a specific economic class. The upper-classed qualities in the show would seem to suggest that African Americans had achieved the American Dream. It is this same notion why critics characterized the show as unrealistic. The majority of African Americans did not live as the Cosby’s, so therefore, the sitcom was not an adequate representation of blacks.

The Cosby Show did what Julia could not do. It presented a successful, intact, African-American family with both parents. America was now ready to see what African-American had been doing all along—being professionals, educated, middle classed, and proud of their African-American culture. Critics such as Pamela Turner, Herman Gray, and Henry Louis Gates argue that The Cosby Show did not reflect the masses of African-American society, and therefore, could not be realistic. They support the idea that The Cosby Show was comfortable for white audiences because it says that African Americans are doing well despite American racism and the blame could be shifted away from whites. The critics, however, fail to acknowledge that throughout African-American history, there have been upper-class families whose lives mirrored that of The Cosby Show. The Cosby Show was critical to television sitcoms because it offered a new and insightful scope of black family life without the demeaning images of the past.

Another sitcom that was devoid of historical and racist stereotypes was Tim Reid's Frank's Place. Reid's show dealt with complex intra-racial issues among the African-American community. Set in a New Orleans restaurant, Frank's Place discussed skin color prejudice (light skin vs. dark skin), which historically is a powerful issue in New Orleans. It is at this very core of black on black relationships- and white/black relationships, class warfare, generational conflict, and the subtler forms of white racism.
Remnants of slavery still impacted black life in New Orleans because of separation.

Also, skin color was often a reality in New Orleans. For example, on *Frank's Place*, Tim Reid is invited to join a Boule - an elite group of lighter-skinned African-American men. Reid questions the invitation because he notices that he the only dark-skinned black in the group. The sitcoms portrayed the image of African Americans as educated, entrepreneurs, and like Cosby, upper-class. *Frank's Place* portrayed a different realm of African-American existence in this country. CBS buried the show quickly by shuffling its time slot from Thursdays to Fridays to Mondays to Saturdays. Consequently, Reid's show was never allowed to find an audience due to the frequent moves in scheduling.

**A Different World (1987-93)**

*A Different World*, also created by Bill Cosby starred Lisa Bonet, Jasmine Guy, Dawnn Lewis, Kadeem Hardison, and Darryl Bell as a group of friends encountering their first experience away from home at an historically black university. The show takes place on a fictional historically black campus and offers a scope of African-American college life. Although comedy is the backdrop, *A Different World* uses real issues such as date rape, domestic violence, and black male/female relationships to capture its audience.

Many African-American intellectuals, such as Clarence Spignier bashed the show because it was not serious about scholarship. Some stereotypical elements also exist in the show. For example, Darryl Bell’s character, Ron, is forever chasing women and messaging his ego by letting the audience know of his many sexual exploits, which is reminiscent of the “Brutal Buck” image suggesting that African-American men do not

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9 Marlon Riggs, *Color Adjustment*
know how to control their sexuality. By putting his repeatedly centralizing his overt sexuality, one begins to question his intention of getting an education. Is it for a quality education or for the women whom he encounters? *A Different World* gives viewers a realistic interpretation of the dynamics in the black college classroom. The show also showcased an in-depth pride in African-American history and culture by often showing academic competitions on African-American history.

Bill Cosby wanted to give viewers a multidimensional image of African Americans with college students as the central focus. Although few stereotypes are in the show, such as Ron's oversexed nature, the main theme of the sitcom is concrete. The sitcom depicts African-American students supporting each other through their experiences at an historical black institution, regardless of economic class. For Cosby to even get this show on the air was phenomenal because it brought the African American colleges and universities to the forefront. *A Different World* also promoted African-American pride and history through the many celebrations and historical lessons that were experienced on the show. Viewers had the opportunity to learn about the Underground Railroad, African-Americans owning slaves, and the cultural implications of black life.

**Family Matters (1989-98)**

*Family Matters* is currently TV's longest-running black show. The popular series stars Reginald VelJohnson as Carl Winslow, JoMarie Payton Noble as his wife, Harriette Winslow, and Jaleel White as the nerdy Steve Urkel as well as the suave ladies' man, Stefan Urquelle. The cast also includes Rosetta LeNoire as Mother Winslow, Darius
McCrary as Eddie Winslow, Kellie Shanygne Williams as Laura Winslow, Bryton McClure as Richie Crawford, Michelle Thomas as Myra, and Orlando Brown as 3J.

The sitcom endured because it is not only humorous but it also delivers valuable messages on such issues as family, education, black pride, respect, and the importance of being responsible. The Harriette Winslow character came into existence two years earlier as the tart-tongued elevator operator of the former series, *Perfect Strangers*. Harriette became such a hit with viewers that producers created *Family Matters* as a spin-off for her to star and cast Reginald VelJohnson as her husband, officer Carl Winslow.

*Family Matters* centers on the extended family household. For years, their well-meaning, but extremely nerdy neighbor Steve Urkel has tortured the Winslows. Although Steve has grown up, his unique personality and affinity still result in chaos for the Winslow family, especially when he moved into their home. Harriette and Carl Winslow try to keep their home intact for their popular, college-bound daughter, Laura, and their son, Eddie, who enjoys college life and has perfected the art of flirting with beautiful women.

On one episode, Mother Winslow teaches the children the importance of knowing and appreciating their family background and history. Another popular episode focuses on Harriette Winslow losing her job and how the family pulls together to overcome obstacles. The show has become a record-setting success because of its emphasis on family ties. The major themes of the show suggest that family, morality, and values are important. Like *The Cosby Show*, *Family Matters* appealed to both black and white audiences. The show also depicted African-American family life in a blue-collar working class environment.
The character of Steve Urkel, however, exhibited the themes of the comic “Coon.” Although Steve Urkel is depicted as a genius, many of his antics are deplorable. Steve always makes a catastrophe and often responds, “Did I do that?” Undoubtedly, Steve Urkel is all “brainy” he seems to lack common sense, as most “Coons” such as Stepin’ Fetchit. Unlike The Cosby Show, Family Matters was centralized on the blue-collar, working classed extended family. Instead of focusing on the nuclear family unit, which consists of the parents and children, the grandmother, aunt, and later an adopted son also was a part of the family unit. Although Steve Urkel characterized elements of the “Coon” image, what is most important is his genius. For the first time, viewers actually see a young African-American man create cars, time machines, and other inventions. The main message is that the African-American family could also be a source of strength regardless of economic class.

**Martin (1993-1998)**

*Martin* is a relationship comedy starring multi-talented comedian/actor/director Martin Lawrence. The show focuses on the evolving relationship of Martin Payne (Martin Lawrence) and Gina Waters (Tisha Campbell-Martin) and their immediate sphere of friends, work, and family. Martin and Gina have progressed from newly in love, to developing a long-term relationship, to marriage.

Martin works for Detroit's cable station 51 as host of his own politically incorrect talk show, "Word on the Street." As much as he loves serving up laughs and stirring up trouble, Martin's real passion is his beloved Gina, a marketing executive and an independent career woman. They love each, but each has a different perspective on life and the road that lies ahead. Martin is not about to let his love for Gina or the institution
of marriage take away his manhood; Gina has grown into contentment with settling down and moving into a new phase of her life.

Their close pals are never far behind: Pam (Tichina Arnold) is Gina's quick-tongued, sassy best friend, forever verbally dueling with Martin: Tommy (Thomas Mikal Ford) and Cole (Carl Anthony Payne) are Martin's ever-present buddies and comrades in the battle of the sexes. Lawrence also plays a number of other characters on the series including Sheneneh, his feisty, know-it-all neighbor across the hall; Otis, an overweight, no-nonsense security guard; Momma Payne, Martin's old-fashioned country mother; Roscoe, the young, bratty neighbor and Jerome, a street-slick neighborhood friend stuck in the '70s. Although most of Martin's antics are hilarious, some of the content is hazardous in male/female relationships. Martin and Pam are forever bickering and insulting one another with hurtful statements. While this is supposed to be humor, it creates a divide between the male/female relationships as it relates to African Americans. Martin represents the revolutionary "Coon" by often overtly caricaturizing himself by his actions and facial expressions.

The Brutal Buck image as well as the Black Man/Boy image is also apparent in the show. For example, when Martin and Gina decide to abstain from sexual relations, Martin not only puts ice on his penis but soon is all over Gina with his tongue hanging out and his body pumping her like he is out of control. In addition, Martin's other characters such as Otis and Jerome often make statements that insinuate the objectification of African-American women. On one episode, Otis, (who is Martin portraying an older belligerent security guard) says to a waitress at the local bar Nipsey's,
"Don’t be naked around me on payday!" Jerome, another creation of Martin always refers to Pam as “junk in the trunk,” by which he defines her by her derriere.

Martin’s “slap face” comedy, like Flip Wilson, is a conglomerate of different characters, that is used to present various perspectives of his comedic antics. A particular character, Sheneneh, who is Martin dressed as a woman is often criticized by black intellectuals and media critics. Often, it is ignored that Sheneneh is an independent woman who is an entrepreneur. On many episodes, Martin and Gina counted on Sheneneh to bail them out of circumstantial situations. Sheneneh’s character, also, like Wilson’s Geralidine, suggests that once African-American men dress as African-American women, they can express themselves in such a way that is denied them as African-American men. As black men, they are a threat because of racism in American society. Black women are not treated as threats and are allowed to express their minds, which in many instances, may cause a dichotomy in gender related issues pertaining to African-American male/female relationships.

African-American intellectuals heavily criticized Martin for exemplifying many of the stereotypes from early television. While much of the show is based in comical genre, the complexity of Martin’s characters (much like Flip Wilson’s) could be based from Martin’s real life experiences growing up in urban environment. Regardless of the stereotypes that exist on the show, Martin depicts a professional man immersed in hip-hop culture and his intimate relationships with his girlfriend Gina and his friends. Ideologically, the character, Sheneneh, challenges the mainstream perceptions of womanhood. On one particular episode, Sheneneh is inducted into a prestigious woman’s organization, while Gina and Pam are not. This idea challenges the ideals
promoted by sororities and women's organizations. It also promotes solidarity of women regardless of economic class.

**Sister, Sister (1994-)**

*Sister, Sister* is a situation comedy features real-life twin sisters Tia and Tamera Mowry. From the Emmy Award-winning executive producer, Suzanne de Passé, the series stars identical twins Tamera and Tia Mowry, Emmy award-winning actress Jackee Harry and veteran comedy actor and producer Tim Reid, and newcomers Deon Richmond and Ronreaco Lee.

*Sister, Sister's* debut season on The WB Television Network in 1993 quickly established the sitcom as the #1 comedy program on the network bringing unprecedented double-digit shares among teens and kids for the first time. Further, *Sister, Sister* has established itself as one of the few prime time series that promotes and encourages family values. The series chronicles the importance of education and self-determination, while giving the audience an in-depth scope of how two sisters come of age in a world that only they can define for themselves.

The show captured the hearts of audiences in the pilot episode when identical twins Tamera (Tamera Mowry) and Tia (Tia Mowry) explained how they met and came to live together as one family. Viewers have continued to watch the sisters grow into mature young women and very close friends. New characters Tyreke (Ronreaco Lee) and Jordon (Deon Richmond) as well as the twins go away to college to further their education. The experiences for Tia and Tamera include: Tia falls in love with her professor's assistant causing her and Tyreke to break up; Tia, Tamera and their friends do their own version of the Supremes; Lisa (Jackee Harry) is sued by her young, handsome
employee for sexual harassment; Tia and Tamera pose to be calendar pin-ups; during fraternity rush, Tyreke and Jordan perform a step show hoping to be accepted into a fraternity; Tia becomes a local hero after scaring away a purse snatcher. *Sister, Sister* is devoid of racist stereotypes, which would place the sitcom in the categories of *Frank's Place* and *The Cosby Show*. Instead of focusing on blunt comedy that uses negative images, such as the “Buffoon” and “Coon,” Suzanne De Passé and the writers vividly portray the bond and friendship of two sisters visualize the choices that young women must make to enhance their lives. Subjects such as birth control, rape, and domestic violence are confronted in a realistic and honest manner.

**The Steve Harvey Show (1996-)**

*The Steve Harvey Show* stars Steve Harvey as former 1970s R&B star Steve Hightower, who now takes center stage as an inner-city high school music teacher. The sitcom also stars mischievous students like the ladies man Romeo (Merlin Santana), the tough guy Bullethead (William Lee Scott) and the studious, yet gullible Lydia (Lori Beth Denberg).

But just recently, Hightower stepped out of the classroom and into an office where he now serves as vice principal where he gets to work more closely with, no-nonsense Regina Grier (Wendy Raquel Robinson), the school's principal who has been the object of his desire. When Hightower is not bailing the troublesome teen trio out of trouble or pursuing his love interest, Grier, he is getting advice and hanging out with his ex-roommate, high school gym coach Cedric Robinson (Cedric "The Entertainer"). *The Steve Harvey Show* represents life in an urban education setting. Although Steve Harvey frequently uses what would be considered “ebonics,” he relates to his students on a level
that they admire and respect. The show also confers values and morals to young people by giving young viewers a positive solution to inner city distractions.

There is some problems with the images are *The Steve Harvey Show*. As with *Martin, Hanging with Mr. Cooper*, and *A Different World*, it characterizes African-American men as overtly sexual creatures with uncontrollable libidos. Steve Hightower repeatedly makes sexual epithets to Regina, who often ignores his statements (with the exception of when they actually have a romantic relationship). Although Steve is presented as overtly sexual, the viewers never see this so-called sexuality come into fruition with Regina. This in essence, debunks humanistic qualities of African-American men by positioning them as Casanovas or “players” who never seem to have successful relationships with African-American women. Cedric (played by Cedric the Entertainer) reveals that his mother, mother in-law, or wife control his daily activities. Again, African-American men are seen as being controlled by domineering matriarchs who have nothing better to do than to rule the men in their lives.

*The Steve Harvey Show* was intended to undermine the importance of the black male figure in the high school classroom. Instead, Steve Harvey is a character and role model that his students can relate to. Although as an educator who occasionally butchers the English language, the critical message is that African-American men can serve as mentors for urban youth. The character of Regina (Wendy Raquel Robinson) portrays a principal which also supports the fact that images have changed for African-American women.
**Living Single (1993-98)**

*Living Single* has consistently been the highest-rated prime-time program with African-American viewers. The sitcom, now in syndication, was quietly dropped by the fledging Fox network only to be resurrected in August 1998 when loyal fans waged a vigorous, unprecedented letter-writing campaign to keep the show on the air.

*Living Single* revolves around the lives of four professional black women in New York City and their two male friends. From the beginning, three of the women—Khadijah (Queen Latifah), Regine (Kim Fields Freeman) and Synclaire (Kim Coles)—shared a brownstone apartment. Their close friend Max (Erika Alexander) visits their dwelling so often she might as well be the fourth roommate. John Henton and T.C. Carson portray the two male friends (Overton and Kyle, respectively) who also live in the brownstone building and are actively involved in the lives of the women.

Some television industry observers had questioned the show’s long-range potential for success after the first two seasons because, although African-American viewerships remained high, it did not have much success attracting a white audience. *Living Single* shows African Americans as entrepreneurs, attorneys and accountants, and derives its humor from the personalities and interactions of its characters, not on cheap jokes or stereotypes. For the first time, network audiences got a chance to see a sizable group of articulate, yet still earthy, African-American actors.

*Living Single* possesses multidimensional characters, which exuded an ambiance of intracommunal love and support. While the sitcoms present African Americans as humanistic and multidimensional, it also reveals an ongoing tension between Kyle and Maxine. Although their malevolence for each other evolves into a romance, it quickly
ends and both regress to their bickering and insults. As in Martin, Steve Harvey, and
Hanging with Mr. Cooper, the love/hate relationships suggest that African-American men
and women have negative perceptions of the opposite sex and must communicate on an
immature level, thereby causing unsuccessful relationships.

Living Single shows an affluent circle African-American friends creating a
network of support for themselves. Created by African-American writer and producer
Yvette Lee Bowser, the intent of the show was to show a group of friends sharing their
passions, sorrows, triumphs, and heartaches. The show was criticized for seemingly
using past stereotypes, such as the money/man hungry Regine (Kim Fields) and the not
too bright Sinclaire (Kim Coles). These criticisms, however, do not recognize that all
of the friends have college degrees and were professional and successful. Khadejah
(Queen Latifah) runs her own magazine, Regine (Kim Fields) owns a boutique, and Kyle
(T.C. Carson) is employed on Wall Street. So, the stereotypes that were supposedly on
the show were overshadowed by the positive portrayals of their roles in professional
fields.


The Wayans Bros. is a half-hour comedy about the hilarious mischiefs of real-life
brothers Shawn and Marlon Wayans. They bring comic talents to a series about two very
different brothers who are roommates and run a newsstand business together. Shawn is a
good-looking, eligible bachelor who is responsible while Marlon is just the opposite
although he's just one year younger. His character is a carefree spirit who believes in
living for the moment and looking for the easy way out. Even though the brothers are
best friends, they are not immune to sibling rivalry, and Shawn's patience is frequently put to the test. For example, when Marlon spends the business profits to invest in another business venture and loses the money; he takes dead-end jobs so that Shawn will not realize that the money is missing. Although Shawn is furious when he finds out about Marlon's mishap, he figures out a way to get the money back and maintain their newspaper stand. Shawn tries to remain the "adult" figure, but he's forever being pulled into Marlon's outrageous schemes. Dee Baxter is (Anna Marie Hartsford) the security guard at the building where the brothers run their newsstand, and always nearby at the next-door diner is their father, Pops, who keeps a watchful eye on them.

The antics of the Wayans Bros. are intrinsically similar to Amos 'n' Andy. Although the show is an element of the 1990s, the comedy invokes a dehumanizing theme because apparently, cooning is comedy, especially to the African-American audience. Bogle suggests that the sitcom was pure buffoonery:

There was also the Wayans Bros. Dumb and Dumber was one thing. Dumber and Dumbest was another. Focusing on the misadventures of two nitwit brothers, the series revolved around gags and jokes about women and bathrooms. 11

The arrival of the Wayans Bros. was an intricate part of starting the Warner Brothers Network. Like other African-American comedies, the Wayans Bros. was popular with a younger, urban audience, which generated high ratings for the show. Unfortunately again, pre-existing stereotypes were used to retain the popularity of the sitcom.

The Wayans Bros. was intended to present the new “Coons” of the 1990s. The show depicted in particular, Marlon Wayans as infantile, ignorant, and stupid. In addition, Pops (John Witherspoon), was portrayed as a father who would get the “belt” on

10 Bogle, 426.
his grown sons if they misbehaved. While the images and stereotypes exist in the show, it should not go unrecognized that the brothers owned their own business (a newspaper stand outside of their fathers restaurant) and supported each other tough times. Thus, brotherhood becomes an important element in the sitcom by inserting two brothers as the focal point.

**The Parenthood (1996-)**

After the historic Million Man March, the day where African-American men gathered together to atone and make commitments to their families, more sitcoms began to emerge with the African-American father as the central focus. *The Parenthood* follows the trials and tribulations of modern parenting. Starring Robert Townsend, Suzzane Douglas, Kenny Blank, Reagan Gomez-Preston, Curtis Williams, Jr., Ashli Amari Adams and Faizon Love, *The Parenthood* on the WB is a unique look at the joys and pitfalls of family life in a changing world. Life in the Peterson household is no exception. But thanks to the unpredictable antics of family patriarch and all-around vibrant Robert Townsend, the process is rarely dull. Robert's love for his children -- combined with his vivid imagination and impulsive energy -- propels him to do extraordinary things on their behalf as he continually dreams up untraditional solutions to traditional family problems.

Robert Townsend portrays a communications professor at NYU; his wife Jerri (Douglas) is a law student. Their relationships suggest a supportive and intact marriage. Important lessons on parenting are shown throughout the sitcom. For example, when Robert cannot convince his son of the importance of getting a job, Robert takes a pizza-
parlor job himself --with disastrous results -- just to prove that even he is not beneath doing menial work.

The Peterson's four kids span the ages from teens to toddlers. The oldest two, 16-year-old Michael (Blank) and 15-year-old Zaria (Gomez-Preston), are reaching that age where they are eager to spread their wings, take their hormones for a test drive and avoid being seen with their not-quite-cool parents. Nicholas (Williams) is a bright-eyed eight-year-old who is constantly discovering the joys of mischief. Four-year-old Cece (Amari Adams) is the darling of the family. Offering his own offbeat point-of-view is Robert's childhood buddy, Wendell (Love).

Parenting has never been an easy task, and in the fast-paced, high-tech, user-friendly, information-overload world of the 1990s, it seems more difficult than ever. But Robert and Jerri want the best for their kids -- and they are going to use all the love, ingenuity and creativity at their disposal to give it to them. The show blends realism with comedy, which is synonymous with The Cosby Show. The show could have done without the "day dream" element. In this process, Robert and usually Wendell are shown imagining a comical situation or solution to parenting or marital conflicts. Robert is bought back to reality when Jerri is shown screaming his name. Again, this portrayal of African-American men is limiting because it minimizes the importance of black fatherhood. By having a child like imagination, this not only suggests that he is of the same mentality of his children, but his role as a husband and father is not taken seriously. After all, it is comedy.

The Parent 'hood, focused on parenting within the context of African-American culture. The show also made the African-American father as the focal point and the
primary nurturing role. While doing so, it also in many ways minimized the contributions of the mother role and her parenting methods. *The Parent 'hood* did promote ideals of fatherhood and insinuated that African-American men are not trifling, lazy, or shiftless and could provide positive nourishment for their families. The same is also true for *My Wife and Kids*.

**Moesha (1996-)**

*Moesha*, played by teen pop star Brandy, is considered to be the hippest and most self-assured young woman on TV since the post-Lisa Bonet era of *A Different World*. Unlike Claire Danes' Angela Chase in *My So-Called Life* and Keri Russell's Felicity Porter in *Felicity*, Moesha can actually make a decision without worrying so hard that she burns calories. Still in high school, Moesha does not always make good choices -- she kisses a cute teacher, stubbornly moves out of the house and gets a crush on Fredro from Onyx, which causes a major concern for her father. But as an actress, Brandy consistently makes good choices, keeping *Moesha* real and smart enough to be a confident young woman. The show is realistic because it focuses on birth control, teen sex, pregnancy, and education. *Moesha* positively appeals to a younger audience by presenting *Moesha*, as a teen that learns from her mistakes.

*Sister, Sister* and *Moesha* focus on the lives of young African-American women that are coming of age. The shows suggest that young African-American women can make positive choices to better their lives. This idea is supported by the fact that both Moesha and Tia and Tamera have parents to guide them and pave the way for their lives. In addition, both shows give young African-American women an alternative view of
black womanhood, rather than the exploitative images of young black women that are present on BET and MTV.

**The Hughley's (1998-)**

*The Hughley's* is a derivative of the prior controversial sitcom, *The Jefferson's*. D.L., a self-made man, moves from the 'hood to the land of well-trimmed lawns and minivans in the suburbs. Thus, his goal is maintain his African-American culture in an all white environment. His wife and children, however, seem to fit in quite well, which is disturbing to D.L. D.L.'s pal Milsap (played by John Henton of Living Single) is the voice of the community he left behind, always there to remind him that he is, after all, still African American and should not forget from whence he came. Conveniently, D.L. has various opportunities to realize that white people are not all that bad, while Milsap keeps him in line so he does not become an “Uncle Tom.” The show entertains and is occasionally poignant. But ultimately the disingenuous nature of network television taints it. *The Hughleys*, much to its detriment, still plays by the strange rule that forces black characters to confront what white characters normally do not: flight from the cities to the suburbs.

Darryl Hughley (stand-up comic D.L. Hughley) has borrowed the grating tones and general gruffness employed by Sherman Helmsley as George Jefferson, but without the anti-white bluster, over-the-top arrogance and perpetual grumpiness that made Jefferson funny. Still, like a younger Jefferson in the suburbs, Hughley is a self-respecting black man who is all about his family. In an early episode, just after moving into an all-white community, Hughley catches his young son acting up in school and
chastises him: "These people expect you to act like a fool! You've got to be better than that!" The Hughley's, although comedic, does employ family values and traditions.

The Hughleys, much like the Jeffersons seemed to make comical situations of African Americans who wanted to improve their lives by “moving on up” or in the Hughleys case, “moving on out.” The Hughleys is based on D.L. Hughley’s life when he moved his family out of the “ghetto” and into the suburbs. Just as George Jefferson in the Jeffersons, Hughleys main priority is to not assimilate into mainstream white culture and maintain his African-American roots. Because of this priority, much of the dialogue and action in the Hughleys is very similar to the Jeffersons. While George Jefferson refers to whites as “honkeys,” Hughley refers to them as “you white people.” Much like George Jefferson, Hughley is a thriving entrepreneur, but still maintains that formidable chip on shoulder. Both shows insinuate certain anger towards whites for the racism and injustice that America has imposed on African Americans, yet, ironically, both George Jefferson and D.L Hughley feel that they have to materialize and integrate with whites in order to be successful.

The Parkers (1999-)

After just two seasons, United Paramount Network's (UPN) The Parkers has humored its way into the hearts of television viewers. Already it has become the No. 1 show in African-American households in all of television, which includes syndication, cable and broadcast. In this spin-off of UPN's Moesha, Kim Parker, Moesha's outspoken friend, enters the world of higher education at Santa Monica Junior College. To her surprise, she is joined there by her equally energetic mother, Nikki Parker (Mo'Nique), who is also empowered to attend college as well. Together they deal with the
unpredictable challenges of college life as well as compete to be the center of attention on the same campus. In addition to pursuing a higher education, Nikki also desperately pursues Stanley Oglevee (Dorien Wilson), the handsome professor of African-American studies who is the man of her dreams.

Some of the stereotypes in The Parkers reveal some disturbing interpretations of black womanhood. On many episodes, Kim is made to be the dumb girl who lacks any inkling of common sense, but she is forever singing and dancing. It is often revealed that Kim does not read nor can she spell. In addition, her mother Nikki is portrayed as loud, overweight, and desexualize, which is comparable to the “Mammy” image. Viewers hardly ever see a budding romance between Nikki and Professor Oglevee. This could be because of the taboo of teacher-student relationships. Professor Oglevee’s constant rejection of Nikki thus impinges on moral interpreted and morality. Nevertheless, Nikki falls for a man who is not available which would suggest some sense of fantastical desperation.

The Parkers invokes some of the imageries of Nikki (Mo’Nique) as the “Sapphire,” “Mammy”, and the lack of intelligence portrayed by Kim (Countess Vaughn). The powerful element in the show centers on the mother, Nikki, attending college to further advance her life. While the daughter Kim’s role lacks a bit of intelligence, one cannot ignore that she is intensely creative. On one episode, a fashion buyer wants to invest in the clothes that Kim creates for herself and her friends. Kim actually starts to manufacture her creations, but ceases when she realizes with the help of her mother that this will interrupt her educational goals. The Parkers brings the mother/daughter relationship into the new spectrum of African-American images on
television sitcoms. The Parkers intensifies the mother-daughter relationship by putting the two in the same educational environment. The fact that Nikki (Mo’Nique) decides to go to college is not about invading her daughter’s life, but empowering herself with new opportunities.

The PJs (1999-)

The PJs recessitates Hollywood’s obsessive belief that poor black folks make for good comedy. This show was a creation of Eddie Murphy, with the backing of claymation artist Will Vinton, and Hollywood producers Ron Howard and Brian Grazer. The story is set in the Hilton-Jacobs housing project ("PJs" refers to the projects) in an unnamed city. Murphy is the voice of Thurgood Stubbs, the unappreciated building superintendent, who finds himself the center of so many whimsical mishaps.

The PJs has all the stereotypical minority characters you can put in one show, and they cavort in ways that harken back to Amos ’n’ Andy. Several stereotypes exist in The PJs. Thurgood Stubs is always making jokes about the neighborhood where he lives. He is also characterized as being ignorant, childish, and stubborn like many African American in sitcoms. The “Over- nurturer,” who is Thurgood Stubbs wife serves as a buffer for his shrewd actions. There is the voodoo woman who is prone to sticking dolls with pins; the old woman who is hard of hearing and eats dog food; the philosophical crackhead; the kid who is so obese that his parents put a sign around his neck asking people not to feed him, which suggest images of the “Pickaninny.” The implication of the PJs invokes the idea that unemployment; poverty, drug-infested neighborhoods, and welfare are funny.
The *P.Js* surprisingly has some intact qualities even thought the blatant stereotypes are used throughout each episode. On one particular episode, Thurgood Stubbs, the super of the building, finds out that the elder lady in the building has been eating dog food. Realistically, there have been incidents of the elderly eating dog food because of their meager income. Saddened by this, he gains the support of other tenants in the building to throw a rent party for her. This suggests that even though the tenants in *The P.J's* are comically surviving poverty and unemployment, they can come together and support each other in need. So the message is that humanist qualities such as good will towards others can exist in what could be considered harsh living conditions. Other messages also exist in *The PJs*. Voodoo is prevalent in eastern urban areas. The voodoo lady is merely a comical exaggeration of this reality. In addition, obesity in children is reality, which is also a comical exaggeration in the sitcom.

**Girlfriends (2000-)**

Being characterized as the black *Sex in the City*, *Girlfriends* is a situation comedy that focuses on the lives of four friends: Joan portrayed by Tracee Ellis Ross, Maya (Golden Brooks), Toni (Jill Marie Jones), Lyn (Persia White), and William (Reggie Hayes). The central character is the single lawyer Joan (Tracee Ellis Ross), a 29-year-old woman with a healthy moral code, a distaste for her moral decisions of her friends, and a desire to elevate the social and speaking skills of her promising assistant, Maya (Golden Brooks). Toni (Jill Marie Jones) is the “gold digger” of the group, constantly attempting to attract the eye of well-dressed and wealthy men. Lynn (Persia White) is the freelove expert and “professional graduate student” hippie whose friendship with Joan dates back
to their college days. The lone male in the regular cast, Reggie Hayes, plays William, a lawyer at Joan's firm.

The first episode concerns Toni dating one of Joan's ex-boyfriends, a toe-sucking specialist named Charles (Jason Winston George). Joan goes through the usual emotional turmoil and the inevitable fight brought on by too many nosy friends. In the second episode, the far funnier "One Night Stand," has Joan going a bit nutty after a year of celibacy. The show advocates the unconditional support and friendship that these women share. It deals with issues of STD's, unwanted pregnancy, sexual addiction, and women's health.

*Girlfriends* focuses on four women who are a circle of friends who support each other through issues of relationships with men, health concerns, sexuality, and personal milestones. The sitcom is the first to advocate the sisterhood among African-American women exclusively. The women on the show also exhibit new roles for African-American women. Just as *Julia* and *Living Single*, the women are lawyers, real estate brokers, graduate students, and office assistants, which suggest that African-American women are no longer, relegated to roles such as the domestic.

**My Wife and Kids (2001-)**

Damon Wayans and Tisha Campbell-Martin portray a loving couple trying to deal with each other, demanding jobs, and three kids in the new ABC sitcom *My Wife & Kids*. Wayans, who serves as producer and co-creator of the series, is cast as Michael Kyle, a Stamford, CT, man trying to figure out exactly what happened to his life. It did not seem like it was all that long ago that he and wife, Janet (Campbell-Martin), had things
working so neatly and simply. She was a stay-at-home mom taking care of their three kids. The relationship takes a sudden turn when, Janet, a high-powered stock market wizard returns to the work force. His only son, Junior (George O. Gore II), seems to care more for gangster rappers than his father; his adolescent daughter Claire (Jazz Raycole) alternates between loving and hating him; and his 5-year-old daughter Kady (Parker McKenna Posey) finds numerous ways to bring joy and grief into his life, and she always has to have the last word. Even the baby-sitter, Rosa (Marlene Forte), gives him little respect.

Janet decides that she will re-enter the workforce and embark on a new and exciting career. He, on the other hand, figures, since he gave up his job at UPS to strike out on his own, and he makes very good money, she should not even consider working, at least not full-time. Because of their commitment to their marriage and family, the two go to marriage counseling.

Wayans proves to be a nurturing father. When Claire tries to wear tube tops and tons of makeup to impress a boy she likes, he manages to convince her that she needs to search for self-esteem within and not through boys. He also points out the only male who really counts already loves the way she looks. Like The Cosby Show, Parent'hood, Me, My Wife, and Kids is a different from other sitcoms due to the fact that it focuses on the African-American father as being the nurturer. This is a humanistic element in the show that captures its viewers. The African-American father is not only an integral part of the household, but is a stay-at-home dad. In this process, Wayans, like Cosby has revolutionized the black family on television by re-inserting the father role/element. The same is true for Family Matters, Good Times, and the Parent’hood.
CHAPTER SEVEN
CONCLUSION

No Room for Drama

Racist stereotypes are still used to depict characters on African-American-themed sitcoms. Although these depictions occur in a more subtle tone, they are still derivatives of old stereotypes. African Americans have BET (Black Entertainment Television) as well as a conglomerate of comedies on WB and UPN. No dramas (with the exception of Soul Food on Showtime) exit on network television.

In this study, the stereotypes were examined to deconstruct images and to examine if mediated messages offer underlying meanings of the sitcom. Most media scholars such as Donald Bogle, Karen Ross, Jeanette Dates, and Herman Gray suggest that only negative images exist on television other than The Cosby Show and Frank’s Place. In this study, the researcher does not deny the existence of these stereotypes. Another interpretation, however, is needed to examine the underlying assumptions, intended messages, and meanings of African-American sitcoms.

Amos ‘n’ Andy presented stereotypes of the “Coon,” however, the show was pivotal because it featured a predominately black cast, and most importantly, it exhibited African Americans as entrepreneurs, lawyers, and other professions. In this sense, the
show was different from *Beulah* because eradicated the image of the happy servant.

Most of the modern sitcoms, such as *Martin, Living Single, Girlfriends,* and *The Parkers* suggest that the intent and the message of the sitcoms offers new meanings and categories for African Americans. For example, *The Beulah Show* portrayed African-American women as domestics and now, shows such as *Living Single, The Steve Harvey Show,* and *Me, My Wife, and Kids,* give examples of African Americans as professionals, educators, and stay-at-home fathers.

These new categories, however, are still embedded in for a form of comical entertainment. The researcher also found that there is an ongoing theme of imageries pertaining to African-American men. Black men are portrayed as immature, over-sexed boys, while African-American women are depicted as over nurturing and sapphires. Both elements imply that the tension that exists between African-American men and women is a comedic formula, which contributes to a sitcom's longevity on any particular network. While humor historically and currently been a coping mechanism for African Americans, one must question why the new categories of images do not exist in dramas? One answer could suggest that African-American comedies are more popular and satisfying to both white and black audiences, given the tradition of minstrelsy and vaudeville.

Although some racial stereotypes still exist in African-American situation comedies, there are new categories that suggest that black-themed sitcoms are moving forward. Today, African Americans are not portrayed as "Mammies," shiftless and lazy "Buffoons," or blatant "Coons." As evidenced in *The Cosby Show,* African Americans are seen as professionals who do not necessarily integrate or assimilate into mainstream culture. As with *Frank's Place,* highly educated, upwardly mobile African Americans
began to revolutionize images of African Americans on sitcoms. Even on shows such as *Martin, Wayans Bros., Living Single,* and *Girlfriends,* the element of young successful African Americans cannot be ignored. Although the new images are still perpetuated through comedy, the message implores the notion that these new images are starting to eradicate earlier stereotypes.

Based on the new categories, African Americans in sitcoms have entered the workforce or have established their own businesses. The idea of entrepreneurship is an important factor in the economic development for African Americans because it suggests that blacks have empowered themselves economically. For example, Cliff Huxtable (Cosby) D.L. Hughley, George Jefferson, Khadija (*Living Single*) and, *Martin* all use entrepreneurship to employ the belief that African Americans should create their own wealth. A different economic status is also presented though new characterizations. Just as the *Jeffersons,* *The Cosby Shows,* *The Hughleys,* *Sister, Sister,* *Frank's Place* and *The Parent'hood* suggest the realization of the middle to upper class segment of black America.

Education for African-Americans is also a critical element in black culture. *A Different World* portrays this notion by centralizing the historically black institution as the key theme. Thus knowledge for African Americans becomes the main force behind the message in the sitcom. African-American men are no longer presented as only shiftless, ignorant, and lazy. Shows such as the *Steve Harvey Show* have elevated men to the role of educator and mentor. In the show, students are always seeking his advice and guidance. The nurturing father role is now more popular than ever. *The Hughleys,* *Cosby, Parent'hood, and Me, My Wife, and Kids* present African-American men as the
central nurturer in the upbringing of their television families. In addition, African-American women, although slightly minimized in these sitcoms, are now part of a two-parent household rather than that of a single parent. Many of these shows were created due to the lack of positive images pertaining to the African-American man’s role in the black family. The implication of the media in general suggests that African-American men are absent and negligent fathers. Girlfriends offer new categories because it shows professional women nurturing their friendships through continual support of each other. Another idea implies that because African Americans have been perceived as inferior, creating shows to compartmentalize African Americans into comedy makes it easier for the audience to laugh. Even within the context of mediated messages, new categories cannot be taken seriously by the audience because the categories are bombarded with hilarious jokes and laughter.

However, this is just what the sitcom is meant to do—to make us laugh. Sitcoms are merely comical exaggerations of reality. Within the context of African-American sitcoms, many of the images could be viewed as a genre by which African-Americans do not laugh at themselves, but at the representation of themselves within the white imagination. Again, comedy could be seen as a means of folklore by which blacks are getting over on whites by implying the idea that the white representation of blackness is used by black actors to reveal the racial ignorance of whites.

While there are shows that exhibit a more multi-dimensional and humanistic nature such as The Cosby Show, Frank’s Place, The Parkers, and Family Matters, the shows still have one main theme in common—they are still of the comedic genre. What does this suggest about African Americans in entertainment? That African Americans
main occupation in the entertainment industry is just that, to comically entertain. The most critical mediated message in this study is that African-American entertainment on television is not suitable for drama, but explicitly shaped for comedy.

With the new categorizations in African-American sitcoms, African Americans are moving forward to control the black gaze. In other words, many stereotypes and definitions are no longer being only controlled by white media. The proposed research does not evaluate the perceptions or views of the audience. Further research on the impact of images and mediated messages of Africans Americans from a viewer’s perspective would contribute greatly to the field of media research and cultural identity.
Appendix A
Code Sheet

Name of Sitcom:

Number of Main Characters:

Black Themed or AA Main Character:

Number of Episodes Viewed:

Number of Stereotypes Found:

Family Orientation: Nuclear Single Parent Single Non-Traditional

Occupation: Professional Entrepreneur Servant Blue Collar White Collar Student

Residence: Projects Upscale House or Apartment Suburbs "Hood" Dormitories
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