

**JUST FOR LAUGHS:  
AN ANALYSIS OF 21ST CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN SITUATIONAL COMEDIES**

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**ABSTRACT**

There have been studies regarding the roles and stereotypes of African Americans in the American entertainment industry. Most of these studies have been expository pieces, stating the stereotypes portrayed and adopted by actors and actresses. It has been reasoned that the cause of stereotyping within the entertainment industry is the underlying, and sometimes blatant, racism of American society. This theory definitely has been corroborated, but there is more that needs to be analyzed. Besides the reasoning behind the stereotypes, this thesis plans to look at the evolution of the stereotypes in African American situational comedies as well as the ideological institutions and theories that help to maintain the status quo of the entertainment industry.

Mass media is one of the many reflections of the culture and society in which it is located. This statement is no less true for American society. Throughout American society's transformations and revolutions, its' media has also gone through

an evolution of its' own. African Americans' trials and tribulations in discovering not only themselves, but also their place in the world of American entertainment is one that was mirrored on the television screen. From the sheer numbers of African American programming to the roles given to African Americans, this conflict is one that has continued for decades.

This work has discovered that because of the historical relationship between African Americans and American society, there will always be an element of prejudice in the American entertainment's representation of African Americans. The African American community has to discover and achieve a new manner in which to get their representations to the masses. This would require an acceptance of the diversity of the African American community and not feel the need to comply with an established dominant society view of what a "good" representation. There needs to be a concern for an honest representation. This may not be possible in the genre of situational comedies.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Within the opening of the twenty-first century, American society has seen the first African Americans winning the coveted Academy Award for Best Actor/Actress, an African American hip-hop artist winning Fashion Designer of the Year, and the first African American Secretary of State and National Security Advisor. With all of this political and social progress, this work aims to discover if American society is truly ready to embrace African Americans.

Societies are composed of many components, among them cultural, economic, and physical attributes. American society is one that prides itself on its diversity and a strong sense of individuality. The rhetoric of “mosaic” is the image that American society promotes among its own citizens as well as around the world. Forgotten and ignored is the strife and conflict that American society has gone through to get to the point of acceptance that it is at now. The white dominant population did not immediately accept the different ethnic groups within American society. The manner in which the ethnic groups came to America played an important factor in the establishment of their relationships within the group and among one another. Some

brought against their will; some with the hopes of a better life, and some arrived out of curiosity – to explore the land that they have oft heard of.

This struggle between the ethnic groups in America has not ended. This struggle is a continuously evolving entity reflected by American entertainment media. African Americans are just one of the ethnic groups that continue to see their struggle displayed in American mass media, from theater to radio to television. Looking at the historical to present media illustrates the changing attitudes of American society in many aspects, specifically regarding racial relationships. Ignoring the reciprocal relationship between mass and society is a fatal mistake. The view that “television and society cannot be separated” (Gorney and Loye 170) enforces the belief that society is reflected through mass media and mass media reflects society.

American mass media have gone through an evolution of its’ own following American society’s transformations and revolutions. From the theater to the Internet, American mass media are constantly growing and trying to find their place within society. With every change in the media, the images and messages that they send out are important. As a form of mass media becomes universal, it becomes more important that the society where it is placed examine the images that it sends out. In the twenty-first century, the media of the television is the must-have fixture within the

American home. “Statistically, the only thing Americans do more than watch TV are sleep and work.” (Blystone and Ryan 184).

The television in American society is an educator, an entertainer, a babysitter, and a friend. The power that the television, and in turn the television industry, has upon any society, especially American society is one that cannot be ignored. Upon its introduction to American society, many had hopes and thoughts concerning the possibility of the television. Sociologist, Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., wrote:

Television is a science and an art endowed with incalculable possibilities and countless opportunities. It will enable a large part of the earth’s inhabitants to see and to hear one another without leaving their homes...Eventually it will bring nations face to face, and make the globe more than a whispering gallery. Radio vision is a new weapon against hatred and fear, suspicion and hostility.  
(3)

It is through the television that many Americans interact with one another. The various ethnic groups within American society continuously come into play with one another with just a flick of a remote. For some, this is the **only** dealing that they have with other ethnic groups. Entman and Rojecki wrote, “Lacking much opportunity for repeated close contact with a wide variety of Blacks, Whites depend heavily on cultural material, especially media images, for cataloging Blacks.” (49)

As time progressed, so have the frequency of images of African Americans in American entertainment. In the beginning, the images of African Americans were consistently racist and stereotypical, ranging from mammies and Uncle Toms to Sambo (the dancing, happy-go-lucky, but ignorant African American male). As society became more accepting of African Americans, they were more willing to accept them on their television screens as well. This acceptance only went so far though. African Americans were always background characters and portrayed as the help, the drug dealer, the athlete, and/or wisecracking friend. Eventually, African Americans were able to step into the spotlight and become the main characters of their own programs. While there were those programs that have broken established stereotypes, there were those that presented modern day versions of old stereotypes.

The goal of this thesis is to analyze African American situational comedies for the acceptance, or lack thereof, of American society towards African Americans. After all, it is through mass media that one can detect the feelings and the relationships within a society. There are those who believe that while mass media may not shape society, they do “reflect the prevailing taste of their time. This is so because they are designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator, a status which ensures that media will reflect more than shape society’s attitudes.” (Gorney and Loye 169)

The thesis of this work is to investigate to what extent are 21<sup>st</sup> century African American situational comedies a modern manifestation of American stereotypes in addition to if they are the demonstration of the progress made by African Americans within American society. Through ideological critique and statistical methodologies, I will address this question. There have been previous explorations of the different stereotypes of African Americans in the American entertainment industry, but there has been no study involving the shows of the twenty-first century.

In addition, prior research was a statement of the facts, whereas this work aims to examine the reasoning behind this phenomenon and offer possible solutions. I have also chosen to look at African American comedies because of sheer numbers. The number of African Americans within the comedic sphere of American television is much larger than in any other genre. Having a larger number of African American programs to compare between also helped to establish the patterns found within this work. The logic behind this trend is examined further in chapter VI, “Ideological Framework”.

To give the reader a clear indicator of the terminology used in this thesis, I have compiled the following chart of core concepts used throughout this work. The core

concepts include African American situational comedies, stereotypes, ideology, dominant society, and American entertainment television.

CONCEPT	DEFINITION	INDICATORS
African American situational comedies/African American comedies	A weekly series of self-contained episodes with its story lines revolving around an umbrella plot, and centering upon a core case of characters. The programs rely upon gags, one-liners, and physical antics to generate humor (Coleman 6)	The plot centers around at least one African American actor ❖ For the purpose of this study, I used programs that ran for at least one full calendar year
Stereotypes	A conventional, formulaic, oversimplified conception, opinion or belief. It promotes an unvarying pattern of a group that has come to be associated with negative portrayals (Coleman 78)	❖ A portion of this study will look at character stereotypes which are when the same traits of a character can be found in different programs
Ideology	The set of ideas and representations in which people collectively make sense of the world and the society in which they live (Dyer 2)	
Dominant society	The division of society that controls the majority of the laws and regulations of the rest of society, primarily considered to be of the white American population	❖ Those who influence and control the programming and imagery of American mass media, especially television
American entertainment television	The entertainment television industry of the United States	❖ For the purpose of this work, the stations considered are the ones found on basic cable

## **Overview of Thesis**

The first section of this work examines the foundation for the creation of stereotypical roles within African American situational comedies. This section also establishes the historical framework for African American programming within American entertainment television. Chapter II, “Ideological Framework”, examines the possible grounds for the current structure of American entertainment television and its relationship with African Americans. The philosophies of scholars Hans Enzenberger and Louis Althusser are used to illuminate the institutional and mental decisions made by the television industry and African Americans concerning the comedic programming.

Chapter III, “Minstrel Shows as the Foundation for Modern-Day Stereotypes in African American Situational Comedies”, presents a timeline charting the evolution of African Americans in American media, beginning with the theater and ending with television. It is within the eras of theater and radio where many of the stereotypes that we are now familiar with arose, such as “Uncle Toms” and “Mammies”. In Chapter IV, “Historical African American Comedies”, I recount the African American situational comedies of American entertainment of the twentieth century starting with “Julia” (1968-71) and ending with “The Parkers” (1999-2004). A brief summary of the shows is provided along with a review of the “atypical” stereotypes found within these shows.

The next chapter of this work analyzes a program that labeled groundbreaking and innovative for African Americans. This program is “The Cosby Show”. Chapter V, “*The Cosby Show: The Breakthrough Show*”, provides for those who are not familiar with it, a summary of “The Cosby Show”. This chapter also analyzes the praises and critiques of the program. While others have deemed it as a trend setting show, others have stated that it too presented a false representation of African Americans. The representation just came in what some deemed a prettier package. This chapter also examines what influences “The Cosby Show” had on its successors and American society, negative and/or positive.

Chapter VI: “African American Situational Comedies of 2000 – 2004” presents the African American comedies of the twenty-first century. These programs began their run in the year 2000 and are the focus of this work. Within this chapter, brief summaries are provided to familiarize the reader with the programs.

Chapter VII, “Character Analyses” goes into an in-depth examination of the stereotypical character roles of African Americans in situational comedies. Within certain decades, there were certain themes that were present for the programming of

that century. These themes helped to dictate the character roles portrayed by African Americans. What is also examined is the presence of new typecasts in the advent of the twenty-first century.

An online survey was performed in conjunction with this work. Its purpose was to discover if a change in demographics in the audience of African American situational comedic programs reflected a changing attitude of American society towards African Americans. In Chapter VIII “Audience Demographics”, the results of the survey are examined and trends are explored. The survey took place over three months and had over four hundred participants.

In the conclusion of this work, I examine what, if any progress has African American had within the arena of American entertainment. While solving race relations and eradicating stereotypes is not the purpose of this work, it is my hope that it brings to light the mechanics behind the television industry and the power of the African American community. In the final chapter, “Future Trends of African American Situational Comedies”, I examine what future, if any, exists for the promotion of non-stereotypical roles for African Americans in situational comedies.

## **Chapter 2. Ideological Framework**

Just pointing out the stereotypes within American entertainment television would be an easy way for this work to look at the possibility of modern manifestations of stereotypes of African Americans. However, it is the author's belief that in order to understand the impact and variation of stereotypes, one needs to examine the ideology that works behind American society in their typecasting of African Americans within situational comedies. One has to remember, "the maintenance of ideology is a long-term process" (Cormack 20). As American mass media is the most dominant form of entertainment within American society, "the representations of race and racial interaction in fictional and nonfictional television reveal both the elements of the dominant racial ideology as well as the limits to that ideology" (Gray 133).

### **What is Ideology?**

Before continuing, the term ideology needs to be defined. In the Introduction, Dyer's definition of ideology was "the set of ideas and representations in which people collectively make sense of the world and the society in which they live" (Dyer 2). To expand on this definition, Gray states, "In popular culture, ideology is secured through the psychological appeal to utopian values and aspirations and a simultaneous

repression and displacement of critical sensibilities that identify the social and economic organization of American society as the source of inequality” (133). American situational comedies attempt to represent society in a blissful manner where problems are solved through humor and laughter.

Arthur K. Spears defines ideology in a more specific manner. He writes that ideology is “a set of ideas to justify and support vested interests” (30). The interests that Spears talks of relates to the interests of the ruling class. It is the opinion of Spears and others that the ruling class uses the entertainment media as the instrument to relay their philosophies and ideals to the masses. Spears continues on to say that ideology is

a mechanism for the creation for the creation of false consciousness, a thought-limiting system that distorts reality, even though much of it is based on “objective” facts...ideology infiltrates most of the discourses and images with which we come into contact through the mass media, education, religion, and corporate-produced popular culture: television...Ideology seeks to naturalize, that is, to make the status quo seem to be the natural order of things, “common sense,” rather than the result of diligent maintenance (30).

Philosopher Louis Althusser defines ideology as “the system of the ideas and representation which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (106). In the simplest of terms, ideology is a set of ideas used to support the desires and thoughts of interested parties. Different factions will have different ideologies related to the different aspects of their lives. Within American society, the issue arises as to whose

ideology is being projected to the masses and the manner in which this ideology is projected.

### **Ideological State Apparatuses**

American society has used the entertainment industry in many ways. Its obvious function is to amuse the masses – to provide them with diversions from their every day lives. Another function of the entertainment industry, though unbeknown to the majority of American society, is to shape it. The effect of the American entertainment industry upon American society is one that cannot be denied. Television programs have introduced the various members of American society to one another in a manner not possible physically. Every day, if one chooses, they can meet and look into an interpretation of the lives of some of the different ethnicities and cultures in American society. This important feature of the medium of television, this ability to enter a substantial number of homes without any protest from society members, provides the entertainment industry with an enormous amount of power.

Louis Althusser characterized the entertainment industry as an ideological state apparatus (ISAs). Althusser defines ISAs as “a certain number of realities, which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (Althusser 96). The purpose of the ISA is to maintain the status quo

established by those in power. The purpose of the ISA is to preserve the unwritten rules and thoughts, in other words, the ideology, of those in power. In order for those in power to remain in power, their preferred way of life needs to be constantly, as well as consistently reproduced in as many different ways as possible.

Althusser admits that while ISAs function primarily through ideology, “they function secondarily by repression, even it ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic” (Althusser 98). Some of the institutions/forms that would fall under the category of ISAs are “the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade union ISA, the communications ISA, [and the] cultural ISA” (Althusser 96). The ISAs realize that they have the power to become so deeply embedded as part of one’s life, that to reject their way of thinking, is in fact, to reject the rules of society. It is in this manner that they work for those in power. There is no blatantly open action taken by the ISAs to maintain control. It is all done under the guise of concern or informing or desiring to help the public. This is the path of the television industry. The different types of programming shown on American television reflect the system of ideas that dominate American society. African American situational comedies are a clear reflection of this philosophy.

Past critiques of the American entertainment industry in relation to African Americans has dealt with lack of representation to the stereotypical roles that African Americans are casted in. Yes, African Americans now have forefront roles in various television programs, but the roles that they play are truly not that different from the ones of the past. African Americans still play the fool, whether their characters are successful in their field of work or not. One wonders if this occurs because American society is only willing to look intimately at African Americans if their portrayal corresponds with the ideology of those in power, mainly white America. American society is familiar with African Americans in certain types of roles within situational comedies, that when characters step out of these roles, either the programs are considered a phenomenon (i.e. *The Cosby Show*) or it is a failure (i.e. *Frank's Place*).

Althusser writes, "What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system on the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relations of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (111). By putting African Americans on the screen, in roles both stereotypical and non-stereotypical, those in power have seen this as an illustration of the improvement in interpersonal relationships between African Americans and the rest of American society. Within

African American situational comedies, a world of equality exists – one with no racial problems. However, this world is not an actual representation of today’s American society. The racial ideology of American society has changed from the 1960s, but it is not the one reflected on American television.

### **Why Television?**

This discussion of ISAs does not answer the question as to why the medium of television has been able to aid in the false sense of reality and intercultural relationships created by those in power. Hans Magnus Enzenberger notes, “With the development of the electronic media, the industry that shapes consciousness [the entertainment industry] has become the pacemaker for the social and economic development of societies in the late industrial age” (20). With the blink of an eye, images are thrown into people’s homes across the country, whether they want them there or not. This power of immediacy and intimacy is something that was started by radio, enhanced by television and will further progress with the Internet. After all, “the electronic media have not only built up the information network intensively, they have also spread it extensively” (Enzenberger 24).

Not only does the television, as well as other forms of mass media, enter the homes of American society with effortlessness unforeseen, they also help to shape the

impressions of ethnic groups to those isolated members of society. Therefore, the ideological reasoning behind the representations of any ethnic group in American entertainment becomes that much more important. Some might argue that the representations in American entertainment are not ideological, that they are in fact just entertainment. Yet there is more than just their entertainment value that is at question. These stereotypical roles play a part in the shaping of relationships between the members of American society. Herman Gray discusses this in saying:

Media representations of black success and failure and the processes that produce them are ideological to the extent that the assumptions that organize the media discourses shift our understanding of racial inequality away from structured social processes to matters of individual choices. Such ideological representations appear natural and universal rather than the as the result of social and political struggles over power (133).

With this massive network available, the next important issue is of who is controlling this network. Theoretically, “The new media are egalitarian in structure. Anyone can take part in them by a simple switching process...Potentially, the new media do away with all educational privileges and thereby with the cultural monopoly of the bourgeois intelligista” (Enzenberger 30). Even with this possibility of social equality through electronic media, this level playing field has not occurred. Those in power have realized the possibilities of the television industry and have done their best to control the medium. Through copyright violations and other legal maneuvers, those

in power have attempted to prevent the masses from influencing the current form of the television industry. Enzenberger realized this as well:

Naturally, bourgeois society defends itself against such prospects with a battery of legal measures. It bases itself on the law of trespass, on commercial and official secrecy. While its secret services penetrate everywhere and plug in to the most intimate conversations, it pleads a touching concern for confidentiality, and makes a sensitive display of worrying about the question of privacy when all that is private is the interest of the exploiters (34).

Those in power are not the only ones preventing the masses, in this case African Americans, from shaping the television industry. “The masses do not know how to use the media properly. The sort of thing that goes on in popular television shows is taken as proof that they are completely incapable of articulating on their own” (Enzenberger 33). By not collectively effectively addressing the inadequacies of today’s television, the African American community has in fact permitted the television industry to display them as it has - the drug dealers, hip-hoppers, ready-to-make-jokes kind of people.

Understanding the ideological composition of the structures in place that assist in maintaining the stereotypical roles on American television is a start. Chapters later in this work examine in detail the creation and possible logic of the stereotypical roles of African Americans in American situational comedies. The next chapter provides the reader with evolution of African American stereotypical roles from the theaters to television.

### **Chapter 3. Minstrel Shows: The Foundation for Modern – Day Stereotypes in African American Situational Comedies**

The easiest and most convenient manner in which the majority of the non-African American members of American society establish their conceptions of African Americans is through the entertainment industry. After all, “America’s consciousness about Black people are notions and beliefs that dominate the public discourse, that which is created by the majority group and which is disseminated primarily for majority group consumptions through mainstream media outlets (e.g., Hollywood, network television, the White press)” (Coleman 33). One of the first media outlets depicting African Americans to the rest of society was the minstrel show.

This chapter will first examine how minstrel shows established many of the stereotypes that eventually found their homes on primetime television. It will then examine the evolution of these stereotypes through the mass mediums of radio and television.

#### **Minstrel Shows**

The first introduction of African Americans into the entertainment industry was through minstrel theatrical shows. A minstrel show is defined by The American

Heritage Dictionary of the English Language as a comic variety show presenting jokes, songs, dances, and skits, usually by white actors in blackface (“Minstrel Show”).

Reflected through minstrel theatrical shows were the stereotypes of American society in the 1800s of the happy and comical Negro slave and the White chivalrous masters.

This image of the relationship of American Americans and the White slave masters set the stage for the stereotypes of the minstrel shows, which eventually evolved onto the television screen. These minstrels supposedly “drew upon some sort of homogeneous Black culture that the actors (almost always White male northerners [in blackface]) had somehow witnessed first-hand” (Coleman 43).

Minstrel shows developed from “18<sup>th</sup> century direct address, oral comedy where yarn tellers, tale spinners, and medicine show barkers would engage crowds” (Coleman 41). A minstrel show was a composite of vaudevillian comedy, variety show skits, musical interludes, and stand-up comedy (Coleman 39). Minstrelsy achieved its infamy through its notorious stereotyping of African Americans especially through the usage of blackface. Blackface was the act of white performers using various forms of makeup to “blacken” themselves. A minstrel performer, Frank Dumont of the DuMont Minstrels describes the process of getting into blackface:

First, we get a lot of champagne corks...These are placed in an old tin pan...and then ignited. When they have been thoroughly burned, they are crushed and reduced to a powder by hand. Then this powder is moistened

with water...Take some into the palm of your left hand, rub it over the palms as if about to wash your face; then smear it over the features as is applying a cosmetic. Carefully apply it around the eyes and about the lips...when you have applied the cork and left the lips in their natural condition they will appear red to the audience (14-16).

White actors used this process along with stereotypical and degrading characterizations of African American language through exaggerated dialect and boorish behavior to bring the minstrel show to life.

Towards the end of the 1800s, America's political environment was in a state of transformation. In 1831, Nat Turner led a rebellion that ended with 60 whites dead. The year 1850 brought about the Fugitive Slave Act, a response to the increased number of runaway slaves. The Dred Scott Decision in 1857 declared that slaves that escaped into Free states were in fact, still slaves, considered property of their owners. The Civil War (1861 – 1865) freed all slaves, in theory, if not in practice, with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. In 1867, the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment declared African Americans citizens and the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment gave them the right to vote in 1870. In 1896, Plessy vs. Ferguson legalized the institution of segregation through the ruling of “separate but equal”.

With the changing environment of America's north and south, minstrel shows came to play an important role. For white southerners, the minstrel shows maintained

the illusion of the Old South that they knew. For northerners, it showed that African Americans were in fact a people content with a life of servitude and were not the insurgents that they had observed. Coleman writes that “Through this theatrical form, presented was the “good ole’ days” gone by when African Americans were thought of as being willing participants in their enslavement” (43). White actors “in blackface mimicked the song, dance, dress, customs, and creolized speech patterns of African slaves for fun and financial gain...” (Barlow 3).

Minstrel shows also initiated American society to many of the stereotypes that are now a part of its everyday existence. There is the “Uncle Tom” character. An Uncle Tom was an African American male who had an almost god-like worship of Whites. Tom was calm and reserved in his mannerisms. He was dedicated to his master and his master’s family above all else. Tom was content with his status in life, and seemed to enjoy the life of slavery. There was also the “Jim Crow” character. Jim Crow was an African American male who sang and danced his way through life. He wore rags and was simple-minded. The “Sambo”, also know as coon, was quite similar to the Jim Crow character, the exception being that Sambo could be more impeccably dressed than Jim could. Sambo too held his master on high, often portrayed as a house servant. He was also quite prone to lie and steal. Sambo

character became the favorite of the white American audience due to his exact replication of the racist ideals of the white population. The antithesis to the happy male slave was the buck. He was the big, black African ready at any moment to revolt and tear down the institution of slavery and attack the white women of America. The buck reminded white America of their image of the savage African that they had brought to America

The stereotypes mentioned here were all of male African Americans. Minstrel shows also depicted female stereotypical characters as well. One was the “pickaninny”. The pickaninny was portrayed as either male or female. The pickaninny first came into existence in early advertisements. The pickaninny was illustrated as “a harmless, hapless imp whose eyes bugged and hair stood on end at the slightest provocation...the character appeared as an incidental smiling, spook(ed) youngster.” (Coleman, 47) Another familiar character is the mammy/Aunt Jemima. Similar to Uncle Tom, Aunt Jemima was fiercely loyal to her master and his family. Aunt Jemima was the motherly and loving slave to the white children that she took care of. She was fat, jolly and happy to be a slave. At times, she could also be sassy, but she was never rude to her white family and society. Another female stereotype was

the jezebel. She was the overly sexual, aggressive African American female. Jezebel was not afraid to break up homes and be a single parent.

As stated before, white actors in blackface frequently portrayed these characters. What is interesting is that there were African Americans who participated in the minstrel shows as well. These African American actors not only depicted these stereotypical characters, they did so in blackface as well. One question is why African Americans would engage in the art form that encouraged racist stereotypes of their own people. Increasing their finances was one reason that African Americans joined minstrel shows. Minstrel shows were quite profitable for the white performers; African Americans saw no reason that they should not profit from an industry that made fun of their culture. Another assessment given for the motive behind African American actors choosing to perform in minstrel shows was “that Black performers knew how to do the coon and Sambo stereotype better than anyone because they themselves were coons and Sambos! ... it was fine for Whites to believe that African Americans were little more than animals because Blacks were now confessing it!” (Coleman 50) With African Americans willing and wanting to take part in this buffoonery, there was no reason for American dominant society to stop.

There was a suspension of reality with minstrel shows, as with all forms of entertainment media, that was required of its audience. Regardless of the blackface, it was still white faces pretending to be something that they were not, African Americans. With the advent of radio, “this new electronic medium made the pretense much easier. The deception depended entirely on mimicking black dialect and intonation” (Barlow 1). As long as the actor could impersonate the speech patterns, or in reality, what American white society saw as the speech patterns of African Americans, their radio show could be a hit. White actors were able to maintain the “art” of blackface minstrel shows by taking their theatre productions to the radio.

## **Radio**

Whereas minstrel shows traveled from town and town and attracted those who can afford them, radio was the first “broadcast conduit for mass entertainment...reaching millions of listeners on a daily basis...” (Barlow 16). White actors who had been replaced in live minstrel shows by African Americans found their new home on the radio. Two of the most famous radio voices were Freeman Godsen and Charles Correll, more popularly known as *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. Their radio show aired during the late 1920s to mid 1930s. The premise of the show was that “Amos Jones (Godsen) and Andy Brown (Correll) were displaced southerners who owned the Fresh Air Taxi Co. (because their only cab had no top or windshield) which they operated

around Harlem... [the show] focused on the exploits of these two dolts and the preposterous twists and turns they lumbered through to free themselves from the predicament of the day” (Coleman 56).

Several factors contributed to the popularity of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. The world of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* consisted of all African Americans, all within different social status. Author Michele Hilmes wrote, “The black community is presented as entirely self-sufficient and prosperous, with its own professional and business class, heirs and heiresses, millionaires, bankers, police, and so on, never encountering the white world of strict segregation and racial discrimination in any form” (88). While there were no rules of segregation, there was also no integration, no mixing between the white majority and African Americans. It was as if white America would not lower itself to associate with African Americans; it has its own world to live and exist in. While *Amos ‘n’ Andy* depicted African Americans in different socioeconomic levels, the people within their community still used uneducated speech. During this time, African Americans were establishing themselves in the northern cities, generating fears upon white American society of an integrated world. *Amos ‘n’ Andy* gave comfort to their white listeners – “drawing on “old south” clichés to relieve Whites’ fears over some ever-looming Black threat” (Coleman 58).

## **Television**

The 1950s brought about the introduction of televisions to American society. With this new medium, the radio serials fell to the wayside. Early television used situational comedies as its genre of choice. Situational comedies had proven their resilience already through radio programs, therefore, television producers opted to stay with a formula that they knew and were comfortable with. To get its start, the television network CBS decided to bring *Amos 'n' Andy* to the air. After all, the program was a success on the radio and enjoyed by members of both white and African American communities. However, television executives also realized that the television was a visual medium. This meant that portrayal of the characters of Amos and Andy could not be in blackface without outrage from the African American community. This is something that executives wanted to avoid at all costs. The NAACP had already been protesting programming like *Amos 'n' Andy* while it was on the radio for its stereotypical renderings of African Americans. In order to bring the program to the television forefront with what the television executives hoped would be minimal complaints; it would require that African Americans portrayed Amos and Andy.

While television executives tried to find the “right” African Americans for *Amos 'n' Andy*, production of other situational comedies took place. The different

networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC) continued to go the old radio programs for inspiration. ABC brought to television a series based on the NBC radio series, “Beulah” in 1950. Beulah was the epitome of the stereotypical mammy. She was the devoted maid and nanny to her white family. Again, ABC chose to use African Americans as their actors in a preemptive attempt to pacify the African American community. The show lasted for three years. During this time, CBS finally found their African American actors for *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. However, even with the African American actors, protests abound from the African American community. The NAACP launched protest against both *Amos ‘n’ Andy* and *Beulah* citing them for the racist stereotypes and degradation of members of the African American community. These shows eventually bowed to the pressure, but their effect on the representation and stereotyping of African Americans had been done.

Always present and remembered in the minds of the American industry were the stereotypes created from the programming of the past, such as mammies, pickaninnies, Uncle Toms and coons. The American audience was changing, and therefore with it, the entertainment industry changed as well. This change was not drastic however. Subtle modernizations of historical stereotypes took place within their programming and representation of African Americans.

What were the African American situational comedies that followed programs like *Beulah* and *Amos 'n' Andy*? The next chapter reviews the African American situational comedies of the 1960s through 1999. Their predecessors in their depictions and language of African Americans influenced many of these programs.

## Chapter 4. Historical African American Situational Comedies

After the reactions from the African American audience, television executives realized that the times of American society had ever been changing. Their audience demographics were no longer composed of just white America. African Americans and other minorities now composed various segments of the viewing audience. Television executives could not ignore this factor. Television executives did not forget the offense taken by the African American community at such programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah*. With this in his mind, television executives were hesitant about producing situational comedies with African Americans as the primary characters. Their initial solution was to have African American talent spotlighted on different variety shows. One show that consistently had African American talent as guests was *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Sullivan received criticism from his white viewers, as well as words of caution from his advertisers, for his insistence on having African American talent on his show. According to MacDonald, Sullivan felt that by integrating African Americans into his programming on a regular basis, white American society would come to appreciate and respect African Americans. Sullivan's belief was that with this appreciation of African

American talent, white America would come to regard their racial and prejudicial views of African Americans in another light (14). While programming like *The Ed Sullivan Show* did assist in depicting African Americans in a positive light and bringing them into the homes of American society, programs that highlighted not just the musical talents of African Americans, but their acting talents as well were needed.

The 1960s brought about the increased physical presence of African Americans on American television. African Americans had recurring roles on drama and crime series (Bill Cosby on *I Spy*), and a few had their own variety shows (Flip Wilson with *The Flip Wilson Show*). However, for this work, the concentration is on the continuation and/or destruction of stereotypes in American entertainment media, primarily, within African American situational comedies. African American variety shows were not examined because these variety shows played upon the stereotypes established by American society to get a laugh. Examining them would bias my findings. This chapter looks to supply brief summaries of the African American situational comedies and any of the stereotypes that were portrayed by the characters.

## **Julia**

One of the first noteworthy African American situational comedies was *Julia* (1968 – 1971). *Julia* starred Diahann Carroll as a middle-class nurse raising her son alone. Her husband had died in a Vietnam plane crash and she lived in an integrated apartment building. Some critics hailed *Julia* for its progressive nature. After all, “Julia Baker was the most assimilated black character ever to appear in the American mass media...Beyond the stereotyped mammies and maids of early TV, Julia was everything that Beulah [was] not.” (MacDonald 124) Diahann Carroll looked nothing like previous African American women on television sitcoms before. She was of fair complexion, average weight, spoke proper English, dressed stylishly, and was a nurse with a professional bearing.

Even with its positive representation of African Americans, there were those with criticism for *Julia*. There were members of the African American community who felt that “because central character was female and husbandless...it continued the matriarchal stereotype – the antimale, emasculating pattern of traditional prejudice.” (MacDonald 126) Other members of the African American community felt that *Julia* was an unrealistic representation of African Americans. She was “too” perfect; she had none of the issues and concerns that other members of the African American

community had. Interestingly, this program was very popular with the white members of the American audience.

### **African American Comedies of the 1970s**

After *Julia*, many of the African American comedians in the 1970s were given their own television programs. However, these new waves of comics were cruder in their humor than their predecessors were. They were more willing to talk about those topics deemed taboo by the majority of American society – race relations and stereotypes. There was no desire for assimilation or acceptance in mainstream society.

The new African American

comics were self-deprecating, continually joking about being black, and bringing to bear on themselves many of the stereotyped prejudices long considered racist. It now became riotously funny to joke about skin color, hair texture, race riots, poverty, welfare checks, and minority social customs. Inhibitions disappeared, and writers and comedians seemed to ignore racial sensitivities. It now became a mark of fashionable outspokenness to deliver jokes based on old bigoted slurs (MacDonald 177).

This tradition of comedy would continue through the 1990s. Comedians and their television programs entered what MacDonald calls the “Age of New Minstrelsy” (182).

*Sanford & Son* (1972 – 1977) was a series revolving around a disagreeable junkyard dealer (Fred Sanford) played by Redd Foxx and his frustrated, but devoted son, Lamont. Fred was constantly arguing with all who came within his yard,

especially his archenemy, his deceased wife's sister, Aunt Esther. Fred did find love again with Donna, whom he was engaged to throughout the duration of the show. Fred had two friends with whom he associated, Bubba and Grady. Redd Foxx was an accomplished stand-up comedian at the time of the show and was able to bring on other comedic friends of his. Foxx's character was uneducated, boisterous, and angry at the world. Fred Sanford was one of the first examples of the lower class "angry black man" with no education who made racist/stereotypical comments about any and everyone, including his son.

Around the same time as *Sanford & Son*, Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin developed several African American situational comedies. Their first program was *Good Times* (1974 – 1979). *Good Times* was about the trials and tribulations of a poor African American family living in the Chicago housing projects. Complete with the hard working, disciplinary yet loving father, James Evans, Sr. and the adoring mother, Florida lived with their three children, James Evans, Jr. (J.J.), Thelma, and Michael. Their neighbor Wilona was stylish, a gossip, as well as best friends with Florida.

Lear and Yorkin also developed *The Jeffersons* (1975 – 1985). This series was about an African American laundry storeowner (George Jefferson played by Sherman

Hemsley), who expands his business into a chain of laundry stores, and “moves on up to the East Side”. Upon the expansion of his laundry stores, George moves his wife and son to a diverse apartment complex in the luxurious area of the Upper East Side in Manhattan, New York. Within this apartment building, the Jeffersons establish relationships with their diverse neighbors and door attendant.

One of the last Lear and Yorkin African American series was *What’s Happening!* (1976 – 1979) This series centered on a three African American males growing up in Los Angeles. These three boys, Dwayne, Rerun, and Roger constantly got into awkward situations with their mischievous natures only to be guided into doing the right thing by Roger’s mother. Roger’s precocious younger sister, Dee, also always exasperates them. Roger’s mother, Mabel Thomas (played by Mabel King) as well the owner of the local hangout shop, Shirley (played by Shirley Hemphill) were played with vivacious personalities and sass.

### **African American Children**

*Diff’rent Strokes* (1978 -1986) was a series revolving around the adoption by a white male millionaire (Phillip Drummond) and his daughter (Kimberly) of the two African American sons (young Arnold and teenage Willis) of his deceased housekeeper. These children literally went from rags-to-riches. Moved from the urban

ghetto into the penthouse of the Drummonds, Arnold and Willis were thrust into a life of luxury of their adopted white family. Another series that revolved around African American children was *Webster* (1983 – 1997). A recently retired football player and his wife's lives are disrupted when a former teammate's orphaned African American son moves in.

### **African Americans as the Help**

Programs like *Benson* (1979 – 1986) and *Gimme a Break* (1981 – 1987) had white households supported by African American help. With *Benson*, Robert Guillaume was the gubernatorial butler, Benson DuBois, sent to assist the bumbling Governor Eugene Gatling in running his household and staff. Benson was witty and sharp-tongued, but all in a respectable manner. In the middle of the series, Benson becomes Lt. Governor and at the end of the series, he ends up running for Governor against Gatling. Benson used proper English and behaved in a dignified manner.

In *Gimme a Break*, Nell Carter played Nell Harper, an African American housekeeper who moves in with a white widowed police chief and his three daughters. Nell was friends with the chief's wife and came to help him with the raising of his daughters and their relationship. Nell was big, loud, and loving – as quick with her tongue as she was to give hugs.

## **African American Comedies of the 1980s**

The majority of programs of the mid-1980s consisted of all African American casts. Actors and actresses of the past resurfaced in roles similar to ones they played in the past. Marla Gibbs returned as Mary Jenkins in the series *227* (1985 – 1990). Sherman Hemsley was Deacon Ernest Frye in *Amen* (1986 – 1991). Both characters were just as sassy as their predecessors were. This time also brought American society the influential show *The Cosby Show* (1984 – 1992), which will be examined in further detail within the next chapter, as well *A Different World* (1987 – 1993). *A Different World* showed African American college students at the fictional historically black college, Hillman. Many praised this show for its representation of African American youth in a positive manner.

## **African American Comedies of the 1990s**

The early 1990s brought back sitcoms based around the African American family. Many of the characters were smart alecks, highly exaggerated in everything in they said and did, and displayed an ignorance that was not from a lack of education, but from a lack of common sense. Some of the shows that came out during this time were *Family Matters* (1989 – 1998), *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990 – 1996), *Roc* (1991 – 1994), *Sister, Sister* (1994 – 1999), *Me and the Boys* (1994 – ?), *On Our Own*

(1994 -1995), *Moesha* (1996 – 2001) and *Smart Guy* (1997 – 1999) to name a few.

These shows did promote the family, but with moments of absurdity. On *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, Will Smith was a young African American whose mother sends him from West Philadelphia to her sister in Bel Air to live and stay out of trouble.

However, Will and other members of the family always find some mischief to get into. With no sense of urban African American culture, Will's cousin, Carlton (played by Alfonso Riberio) and Will were constantly in antagonistic situations for the beginning of the series.

*Family Matters* centered on the Winslow family and the misadventures that they got into, primarily because of their obnoxious, highly intelligent neighbor, Steven Q. Urkel (played by Jaleel White). What was interesting about the character of Urkel is that although he was intellectually smarter than the other characters on the show, he was physically awkward. Constantly tripping over things and causing mishaps, Urkel seemed incapable of acting normally.

Other programs that came out in this time were: *Martin* (1992 – 1997), *The Wayans Bros.* (1995 – 1999), *Malcolm & Eddie* (1996 – 2000), *The Steve Harvey Show* (1996 – 2002), and *The Hughleys* (1998 – 2002). Interestingly enough, well-known

African American comedians were the centers of these programs, with many of their mentors being the comedians of the 1970s.

The show *Living Single* (1993 – 1998) centered on four African American women, a magazine entrepreneur, Khadijah (played by Queen Latifah), her cousin Synclaire (played by Kim Coles), Khadijah's best friend from college and a lawyer, Maxine (played by ) and Khadijah's childhood friend Regine (played by Kim Fields). This program depicted four modern women, independent and supportive of one another and their mishaps as they each pursued their version of the perfect life.

One of the last African American situational comedies introduced in the twentieth century was *The Parkers* (1999 – 2004). The program centered on the mishaps of a single African American mother (Nikki Parker played by Mo'Nique) and her daughter (Kim played by Countess Vaughn). Both women were in the same fictional college, Santa Monica College, striving for their degree. Nikki had her sights set on one of the professors and Kim never seemed to have her sights on anything but her singing and fashion design career.

With the advent of the twenty-first century, one wonders if the stereotypes of the past have continued into the situational comedies of today. This work aims to answer this question. Further analysis cannot continue without a further examination of the program that many critics say changed the face of African Americans on American television, *The Cosby Show* and its creator, Bill Cosby.

## Chapter 5. *The Cosby Show* – The “Breakthrough” Show

Imagine a father who is an obstetrician – gynecologist, a mother who is a partner in a law firm, four beautiful daughters, and one handsome son. This is the blueprint for the modern American family – two working and loving parents with precocious and respectful children. Many people will recognize this family as the one in the critically acclaimed television program, *The Cosby Show*. *The Cosby Show* was and still is a program analyzed by researchers and philosophers. Some praise it for its modern and positive representation of an African American family. Others criticized it for what they deemed an unrealistic portrayal of African Americans in American society. No matter how one felt about *The Cosby Show*, ignoring its influence on African American situational comedies that have followed it would be a mistake.

This work does not look to extol or denounce *The Cosby Show*. The intention of this chapter is to acknowledge the significance that *The Cosby Show* and one of its creators, Bill Cosby, had in the shaping of American media, especially African American situational comedies. *The Cosby Show* has been examined by many scholars, with it being viewed as either “socially progressive or as an apology for a racist system that disadvantages most black people” (Jhally and Lewis 3).

## **Background on *The Cosby Show***

To find someone who does not know of *The Cosby Show* would be near to impossible. However, there are those who may not have seen the program. As stated earlier, *The Cosby Show* was centered on a middle-class African American family residing in a New York City brownstone. The father, Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable (Cliff), was an obstetrician – gynecologist, married to Claire Huxtable, a prominent lawyer. They had five children: Sandra, Denise, Theodore (Theo), Vanessa and Rudy. As seasons went by, grandparents, grandchildren, friends, and cousins all entered the lives of the Huxtables. Each episode of the program dealt with a misadventure of one of the members of the Huxtable family.

*The Cosby Show* debuted in 1984 among other African American situational comedies such as *Webster*, *What's Happening Now!*, and *227*. What made *The Cosby Show* special? All of these programs had the family as its focus. However, unlike these programs, *The Cosby Show* was “not only about a black family, but a family portrayed without any of the demeaning stereotypical images of black people common in mainstream popular culture.” (Jhally and Lewis 2) With this new representation of African Americans on mainstream television, it seemed as if African Americans had finally found their place in American mass media. For some theorist *The Cosby Show*

“has moved the situation comedy to a level beyond that of the more typical Sambo-type Black comedy” (Inniss and Feagin 201).

This positive representation did not come without criticism. Scholars such as Henry Louis Gates felt that the positive images “can actually be counterproductive because they reinforce the myth of the American dream, a just world where anyone can make it and racial barriers no longer exist.” (Jhally and Lewis 3) *The Cosby Show* was developed during a time known as “Reaganomics” in American culture – a time when President Reagan was encouraging the philosophy that any and everyone can be successful in American society as long as they worked hard. The Huxtables were members of the African American upper middle class – a class that had not been seen on American television. The program never discusses the manner in which they achieved their social standing – whether or not they had to face any racial adversity and/or social obstacles. This reinforces the illusion that anyone, especially minorities, can achieve greatness within American society with no problems whatsoever.

### **Bill Cosby – Superstar!**

African American situational comedies had found a niche on American television when *The Cosby Show* debuted. African American programs were filled with stereotypes that the American public had become comfortable. The introduction

of *The Cosby Show* brought a new face to the African American community. *The Cosby Show* was able to maintain its image due to its star and creator, Bill Cosby. Already an accomplished stand-up comedian and star of previous sitcoms (*I Spy*, *The Bill Cosby Show*), America's familiarity with Cosby helped them to welcome this new image of African Americans into their home.

Bill Cosby was not the first African American comedian to receive his own program. Others such as Redd Foxx and Nell Carter had received programs before him. What was it about Bill Cosby that made him so atypical from the comedians that preceded him? One factor was Cosby's brand of humor. Whereas other comedians before him were more about "in-your-face" racial humor, Cosby kept his humor at a level that all members of the American public could relate and laugh at, without feeling uncomfortable. Another factor was that Bill Cosby was a sellable commodity. Authors Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis recognize that "Without Bill Cosby's track record (including, significantly, his ability to sell products on TV commercials), the series would probably never have made it onto the air" (3).

*The Cosby Show* was the program that transformed Bill Cosby from just an actor/comedian into a superstar. While the word star is one that used frequently,

especially in the world of entertainment, Jeremy Butler states that there is an important difference between a star and an actor. He writes, “Not everyone who appears on television is a television star. Stars...are actors or personalities whose significance extends beyond the television program on which they appear” (50). Bill Cosby is the personification of this definition. Jhally and Lewis in their study of audience reactions to *The Cosby Show* learned that “Bill Cosby’s presence as a comedian is an important part of the show’s popularity...Bill Cosby, the actor, and Cliff Huxtable, the character, often merge into a single identity: For many, Bill Cosby *is* Cliff Huxtable” (36). Cosby transcended the status of stardom beyond what other African Americans before him had achieved – he made the role of Cliff Huxtable accessible to all members of American society. This blending of the reality of Bill Cosby and the illusion of Heathcliff Huxtable was encouraged by the network to maintain the popularity and audience of *The Cosby Show*.

An actor can be declared a star by transcending their television program, but what does it mean to American society to be a star? Richard Dyer believes that stars “articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society...they express the particular notion we hold of the person” (8). For the American television viewing audience, both white and African American, Bill Cosby defined what a father should

be, just as in the past they looked to Wally Cleaver of *Leave it to Beaver*. What made this role seem so believable was that Cosby appeared to act in his private life the same way that he did on television: devoted, humorous, loving and concerned. He is one star who has “mastered the public world, in the sense not so much of being authentically themselves in it nor event of being sincere, as of performing in the world precisely, with poise and correctness” (Dyer 14).

For American society, Bill Cosby in private is the Bill Cosby that they see on the television. In recent events, he has spoken out against the image that the rap industry has projected towards African American youth as well as the lethargy of the African American community in uplifting themselves. These comments were received by American society as atypical Bill Cosby/Heathcliff Huxtable thoughts. This is something that Cliff Huxtable would say to his kids, and American society has adopted Bill Cosby as their father.

### ***The Cosby Show* – A Step Forward?**

As stated before, many laud *The Cosby Show* as an advancement of representation of African Americans on American entertainment television. Coleman writes, “Flying in the face of negative, controlling images of the Black family and other racist, racialized representations, ... the Huxtables were virtually perfect, depicted

as: upper-middle class, culturally centered, without stereotypes, achieving – if not surpassing – the “American Dream” (102). Bill Cosby established the positive depiction of the African American family on *The Cosby Show* intentionally. His objective was to demonstrate to the rest of the American society that African Americans were not the buffoons and coons previously displayed on American television. Cosby aimed to prove that African Americans could be humorous without demeaning themselves. *The Cosby Show* “explore[d] the comic potential of the everyday, offering us neither slapstick nor absurdity” (Jhally and Lewis 24).

While there is a consensus that *The Cosby Show* had an impact upon American society, its impact differed among African Americans and white society. The vision of the creators of *The Cosby Show* was for its audience, its white audience in particular, to view the African American family as one of them, no different from any other American family. It was the goal of the program that “White viewers [would] be able to appreciate, understand, and identify with the Huxtables without forgetting that they are actually looking at a black family. It asks white viewers to accept a black family as “one of them,” united by commonalities rather than divided by race” (Jhally and Lewis 36). For many of the viewing audience of the program, the program was able to capture the misadventures of every family in a comical manner. White audience

members felt that *The Cosby Show* reflected issues, concerns, and typical facets of being a part of a family.

For the African American community, *The Cosby Show* was “to provide a mirror that does not reflect the prejudices and stereotypes of white perception but instead shows black people as they would like to recognize themselves – strong, independent, intelligent – a mirror that shows the *dignity* of black American life” (Jhally and Lewis 36). Some members of the African American community felt that there was now programming that they could hold up to the rest of American society to show that they are just as capable and proficient as they are. The images of the past, as well as the images of current programming were not the only portrayal of African Americans. African Americans, as well as other groups of color, had been consistently demanding better representation of their culture on American television from television executives. *The Cosby Show* was one of the first moves in that direction. An African American family that classified in the upper middle class status was new and refreshing to the African American community.

### ***The Cosby Show* – A Step Backward?**

For all its praise, *The Cosby Show* also received its fair share of criticism, especially from members of the African American community. Some saw the series to

be unrealistic of the African American community in America at that time. It was not to say that African Americans were not capable of obtaining the status of the Huxtables, but for some, “the Huxtables’ upward mobility, professional success, and assimilation was depicted as completely unencumbered by racial hurdles. In the Huxtable world, there is no racism” (Coleman, 205). Generally, African Americans’ issues with *The Cosby Show* stemmed not from the fact that the program was an unrealistic portrayal of a family. The problem was that it was an unrealistic portrayal of an African American family (Inniss and Feagan 195).

By placing the Huxtables in the American social order as upper middle class, without demonstrating any of the hurdles that they may have had to overcome, set a sour note for some African American viewers. Jhally and Lewis recognize that there are portions of American society who do not realize the impact that class has on racial distinctions. Television imagery helps to perpetuate this unawareness. Television programs see “class not as a series of barriers but as a series of hurdles that can be overcome. That view promotes the idea of the American dream... We see countless examples of people making it, but few examples of people...*prevented* from making it” (Jhally and Lewis 73). The fact that the Huxtables were an African American family gives this theory greater corroboration. This proved to the American public that as

long as one worked hard, they could achieve greatness. With this mindset, members of the American public felt that “the only way to explain the failure of most black people to achieve what the Huxtables have achieved is to see most black people as intrinsically lazy or stupid” (Jhally and Lewis 94).

*The Cosby Show*, in its eradication of the stereotypical African American roles, placed itself into a hole. While the stereotypes of the previous programs were at times demeaning to members of the African American community, they did demonstrate that there was a complexity among African Americans. This was not the case within *The Cosby Show*. There was a world of uniformity amongst the characters on *The Cosby Show* in social and educational positions.

### ***The Cosby Show* – Its Influence on the Future of Television**

*The Cosby Show* found its place in American entertainment television and set an archetype for African American situational comedies after it to follow. It started the process with its spin-off series, *A Different World* examined in the previous chapter. The rest of this work plans to examine the transformation, if any, in African American representation in African American situational comedies, keeping in mind the substantial leaps taken by *The Cosby Show*. While it is not the intent of this work to keep *The Cosby Show* as its focus, it cannot deny that there was a series, an extremely

successful African American series, which was able to portray African Americans without catering to the familiar stereotypes of American society.

So what were the programs that followed *The Cosby Show* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

To remind and in some cases, inform the reader of these programs, summaries and character descriptions of the African American situational comedies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are described in the chapter that follows.

## **Chapter 6. African American Situational Comedies of 2000 – 2004**

In the twenty-first century, there has been a surge in American television programs consisting of African American casts. As in the past, the largest increase in African American programming has been in the situational comedic programs. These new programs have come at a time where American society believes that it has progressed in its interracial relationships. This focus of this work is to examine the representation of African Americans within the African American situational comedies of the twenty-first century. However, the author recognizes that there are those within American society who may not be familiar with any of these programs. This chapter will provide the reader with summaries of the programs that have come into being in our newest century.

The first African American situational comedy of the twenty-first century is *Girlfriends* (2000 – present). This series revolves around four African American female friends: Joan (Tracee Ellis Ross – daughter of famed singer, Diana Ross), a former lawyer, now an enterprising restaurant owner; Lynn (Persia White), the eternal graduate student and slacker; Maya (Golden Brooks), a single mother and writer; and Toni (Jill Marie Jones), a real estate dealer about to become a mother. The series has

followed the misadventures of these women as they deal with personal relationships, their professional lives, and one another.

Another series is *One on One* (2001 – present). This series consists of a sportscaster, Flex Washington (played by Flex Alexander) attempting to raise his teenage daughter, Brianna (played by Kyla Pratt). Flex's best friend is Duane, a used-car salesman, who is also their neighbor (played by Kelly Perine), while his daughter's best friend is Spirit (played by Sicily) and her on-again, off-again boyfriend is Arnaz (played by Richard Ri'chard). The series follows the mishaps and schemes of the "one on one" relationship between father and daughter.

The year 2001 brought back comedians Damon Wayans and Tisha Campbell-Martin to the television screen in the series *My Wife and Kids* (2001 – present). Wayans stars as Michael Kyle, a loving father with his own special manner of dealing with his three children, Junior (played by George O. Core II), Claire (played by Jennifer Freeman), and Kady (played by Parker McKenna Posey). The series centers around the Kyles as each of the family members strive to find their place in the household and the world around them. As the series has progressed, Junior has become a father himself, living with the mother of his child in the garage of the Kyles.

Another comedian came to the small screen in 2001 as well. Bernie Mac stars in *The Bernie Mac Show* (2001 – present) as himself, a successful African American comedian living comfortably with his executive wife, Wanda (played by Kellita Smith). All of this changes when his sister is sent to jail and Bernie is given custody of her three children, Vanessa (Camille Winbush), Jordan (Jeremy Suarez), and Bryanna (Dee Dee Davis). The series centers on the interaction between the children and Bernie as they attempt to adjust to one another. Bernie is a strong believer in tough love and is fine as the children abide by them, but like all children, they will sometimes break the rules, and that is where the comedy begins.

UPN series, *Half & Half* (2002 – present) looks at the developing relationship between two half-sisters, Dee Dee (played by Essence Watkins) and Mona (played by Rachel True). Sharing the same father and nothing else, these two sisters attempt to establish a relationship based on something other than the bitterness and jealousy that they felt towards one another in the past. Dee Dee is an honor-roll law school student looking to come out from underneath her overbearing mother Big Dee Dee (played by Valerie Pettiford). Mona is a vice president of marketing at a record company,

independent and has her own sense of style. Living in the same apartment building, these two different sisters are making the best attempt to be one big happy family.

Rap star Eve entered the world of American entertainment television with her own comedy series titled *Eve* (2003 – present). As fashion designer, Shelly Williams, Eve finds herself trying to maintain her balance in both her business and personal relationships in the twenty-first century. Shelly co-owns her own fashion design company, DivaStyle, with her two best friends Rita (played by Ali Landry) single and sexy, and Janie – happily married and beautiful. With the presence of Eve's ex-boyfriend and his best friends, the dynamics of the male/female relationship is examined within this series.

Comedienne Whoopi Goldberg also returned to the television screen in 2003 with her self-titled series, *Whoopi* (2003 – 2004). Whoopi starred as Mavis Rae, a one-hit singing wonder who opts to become an owner of a small hotel in New York, which she runs any way she feels like. Assisting her with hotel is her wisecracking and paranoid Iranian handyman, Nasim (played by Omid Djalili), and her younger brother, much more conservative, Courtney (played by Wren T. Brown). Courtney's white

girlfriend, Rita (played by Elizabeth Regen) provides Mavis as a source of humor due to her insistence upon speaking “black”, knowing more than her younger brother does.

Will Smith of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* returned to the television screen in 2003, but this time as one of the producers of the series *All of Us* (2003 – present). *All of Us* examines the attempt at a civilized relationship between divorced parents Robert James (played by Duane Martin) and Neesee (played by LisaRaye), along with his fiancée, Tia (played by Elise Neal). Robert is a successful entertainment reporter struggling to find a place for all the people in his life, his ex, his fiancée, and his son Bobby Jr. (played by Khamani Griffin). Robert receives advice from his best friend and producer, Dirk (played by Tony Rock), while Tia turns to fellow teacher, Danielle (played by Terri J. Vaughn).

*All About the Andersons* (2003 – 2004) brought back John Amos (James Evans of *Good Times*) to the African American situational comedies. The series starred comedian Anthony Anderson as a single father forced to move back home with his parents when his acting career does not take off as he expected. John Amos starred Anthony’s father, Joe who was determined to keep his son from becoming a slacker and did not understand his dream of becoming an actor. Anthony receives support

from his mother Flo (played by Roz Ryan) and their neighbor Lydia (played by Aimee Garcia). Anthony attempts to maintain balance between providing a good example for his son, Tuga (played by Damani Roberts) and achieving his dream, even it is currently unsuccessful.

The last African American situational comedy of the twenty-first century to be examined within this work is *The Tracy Morgan Show* (2003 – 2004). Another comedian, Tracy Morgan brought his own brand of comedy to the depiction of the African American family. Morgan starred as Tracy Mitchell, a hard-working owner of a small auto garage, as well as a father of two, Derrick (played by Marc John Jefferies) and Jimmy (played by Bobb'e J. Thompson). Tracy deals with his family in a streetwise, but loving manner, which is tempered by his beautiful wife, Alicia (Tamala Jones). The series revolved around Tracy discovering the difficulties of owning his own business, as well as maintaining order within his family.

Just knowing the plots of the programs of the twenty-first century is not enough. While the few years of the twenty-first century, an abundance of African American programming came into existence. However, the sheer numbers do not take into account the representation that the actors are portraying. There has been a pattern

to the character roles and program themes of the African American situational comedies throughout time. This is further examined in the chapter that follows.

## Chapter 7. Character Analyses

It appears as though minority groups are currently on American television in record numbers, though the numbers and depictions are still not equal across the board. This is especially true for African Americans. African American situational comedies increased in large proportions in the twenty-first century, most of them concentrated on two networks, WB and UPN.

There are several explanations for this occurrence. Both of these networks are newer than their competitors – ABC, CBS, and NBC – therefore, their audience has tended to be of a different and more diverse demographic. UPN and WB, like their predecessors, have their own characteristics attributed to them. The WB is considered the network for the young with the abundance of programming on this network starring young actors. UPN is commonly referred to as “U People’s Network” due its large amount of minority programs. Both of these networks in attempting to establish themselves among their competitors “use the principle of narrow-casting and the strategy of niche marketing to target their set-up markets: youth” (Gray 123). To focus on this certain audience demographic meant to appeal to that which is most popular, African American culture.

No matter which network the programs are located, the African American situational comedies of the twenty-first century have introduced new characters to American society, as well as reinforced the characters of old. Not just new characters have been introduced through these comedies. Program themes have been a consistent factor of African American situational comedies. These themes have contributed to the development and prolongation of the characters that are now familiar to American society. This chapter aims to look at the stereotypical character roles of African Americans in situational comedies throughout the decades, as well as the program themes of African American situational comedies.

### **Shared Program Themes**

Before going into the character roles and the stereotypes surrounding them within African American situational comedies, one must note that there were certain commonalities within the programs of certain decades. These commonalities help to shape the character roles within each comedy. These commonalities are better characterized as program themes. There have been shared program themes among the African American situational comedies throughout their existence. The themes were developed according to many variables, from the desires of the networks to the demographics of the viewing audience. To understand the stereotypical character roles

created within African American situational comedies, the themes must first be analyzed.

### ***Diversity***

Many of the African American situational comedies share the theme of diversity. The logic behind the type of diversity shown within the programs was dictated by the assumptions of those in power of the networks. In the early days of television, the networks believed that their audience was primarily composed of two ethnic groups, African Americans and whites. In order to appeal to these predicted demographics, the programs consisted of African Americans and whites interacting in familial (*Webster*, *Diff'rent Strokes*) and friendly relationships (*The Jeffersons*). These programs with their African American and white casts,

Later years, the dynamics of diversity within the African American situational comedies changed. As the networks acknowledged that their viewing audience was more than just African Americans and whites, the ethnic groups of the characters on their programs changed. Different ethnic and racial groups were casted into television programs. African American situational comedies had characters of Hispanic, Asian, as well as other ethnic heritages begin to show up and having frequent roles.

### ***All About the Family***

The family dynamic has been a big influence in the themes of African American situational comedies. Many programs celebrated the trials and tribulations of the family and the comical situations that arose within the family. From the American nuclear family (*The Cosby Show*) to those programs where the parents were deceased (*On Our Own*), African American situational comedies, African American situational comedies throughout time have reflected the different structures that constitute a family. Families did not only consist of those related by blood. Some of the African American situational comedies suggested that a strong bond between friends allowed them to be considered family. Certain characters spent so much of their time interacting with the other characters on the program, sometimes unwanted, that they became an integral part of the dynamic of the program (Steve Urkel in *Family Matters*).

### ***Acceptance through Assimilation***

Even with diverse actors as the cast and a society that has eagerly adapted many of the cultural aspects of the African American community, the characters in African American situational comedies strived to be accepted and seen as typical members of American society. For the producers of African American situational comedies, as well as for many members of American society, it seemed that the way to

be deemed genuine members of society was to emulate the dominant members of American society – white Americans. The way to appear to impartial and attract a large number of the viewing audience is to appeal to those standards that the masses believe are the ideal and universal. The idea of establishing the standards of white American society as universal “refers to the ways in which what are in fact white English European values, traditions, practices and beliefs are seen as or assumed to be held by everyone” (Gabriel 68).

Reflecting the dominant society meant several things in the world of African American situational comedies. Some programs had their characters move into a world surrounded by the members of white society (*The Hughleys*) with the intent of giving their children a better life. Others take on characteristics associated with white American society, being well off and educated (*The Cosby Show*), or socializing with others not considered “black enough” by some members of the African American community (*Julia*).

### ***Social Climbers***

The desire for a higher social and economic status was the driving theme behind other African American situational comedies. Of poorer backgrounds than their White counterparts, the plots surrounding the African Americans within

situational comedies are about their struggle and aspirations to make better lives for themselves. The “American Dream” – the promise of a better life through hard work and determination – is known by most of the members of American society. It is the reason that many immigrants choose to come to America. This dream was not lost on the producers of African American situational comedies. From entrepreneurs (*In Living Single*, *The Jeffersons*) to those in the lower classes trying to make it rich (*Roc*, *Good Times*), the characters on African American situational comedies are looking to find their place in the economic world of American society and climb the social ladder of success.

### ***The African American Middle Class***

While there were those striving to achieve a higher economic status, African American situational comedies also had their established upper middle class. These characters have been able to find their place within dominant society both financially and personally. Programs like *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* had their characters living financially stable lives, with none of the financial concerns prevalent in other programs. The African American middle class were the realization of the “American Dream”.

Many of the programs made this achievement seem effortless and the norm, disavowing all of the class struggles that were and are still existent within American

society. These achievements were not limited to the family either. There are those African American situational comedies centered on friends, who all happen to be of this middle class status as well, either through inherited means (*Half & Half*) or through their work (*Girlfriends*).

### ***We're Here...Deal with It***

Other African American situational comedies used their format to bring African Americans to the forefront of the American screen. This is not to say that these programs did not have a plot to them, they were centered on particular characters, but these programs had all African American casts, which differed from the other African American situational comedies. These programs tend to focus more on the interpersonal relationships of the characters, than on any specific universal theme within the program.

### **Character Roles**

With these various program themes, African American situational comedies developed different types of character roles, many of them stereotypical. Many of these character roles developed from the African American stereotypes created in minstrel shows, radio serials, and early television. This work has examined the stereotypes cultivated and created from early American entertainment media in Chapter

3, and it is in understanding the creation of stereotypes that one can recognize the development of new stereotypes.

### ***Stereotypes***

Stereotypes have come to be the specific image/picture that one has of certain groups and/or things. The American Heritage College dictionary defines stereotype as a conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conception or image (“Stereotype”). The generalized images and conceptions that dominate American entertainment television have become so ingrained within American society’s system that they no longer appear to be stereotypes, contradictions to the reality the members of American society know to be true.

Some would argue that the power of stereotypes stems from the fact that they contain an element of truth, which various members of society will take out of context. This element of truth causes the members of American society not to dismiss the stereotypes immediately upon seeing them. Others would argue that stereotypes still exist and remain effective because “they are so laden with ritual and myth” (Dates and Barlow 5). Developing from historical and common images from the past, many members of American society feel a familiarity seeing the images that they grew up around. Walter Lippman explains that stereotypes “are an ordered, more or less

consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted”

(Lippman 63). Lippman further explains why stereotypes are maintained in writing

For when a system of stereotypes is well fixed, our attention is called to those facts which support it, and diverted from those which contradict. So perhaps it is because they are attuned to find it, that kindly people discover so much reason for kindness, malicious people so much malice (78).

The role of the American mass media, especially the television industry, reflects lives of both fantasy and reality. Many would contend that the mass media merely reflect the society in which they are placed. This is a false statement. In fact, “the media are not *apart* from social reality, passively reflecting and giving back to the world its self-image; they are *a part of* social reality, contributing to its contours and to the logic and direction of its development via socially articulated way in which they shape our perceptions” (Bennett 288). With this enormous responsibility and capability, those in control of the media are controlling the images that the masses see. So what are the images that are coming out the entertainment industry?

### ***Uncle Tom***

The stereotype of the Uncle Tom reappeared within African American situational comedies. With *Benson*, Robert Guillaume was the gubernatorial butler,

Benson DuBois, sent to assist the bumbling Governor Eugene Gatling in running his household and staff. Benson was witty and sharp-tongued, but all in a respectable manner. In the middle of the series, Benson becomes Lt. Governor and at the end of the series, he ends up running for Governor against Gatling. Benson used proper English and behaved in a dignified manner, causing some members of the African American community to compare him to an “Uncle Tom” – looking to fit in with the white household around him. Another character who modernized the image of Uncle Tom was on the show *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. This character was Will Smith’s cousin, Carlton (played by Alfonso Riberio). With no sense of urban African American culture, Carlton consistently spoke of his desire to emulate and be a part of the upper class world among his idols, Ronald Reagan for one.

### ***Mammy***

Various programs brought about the modern image of the mammy. On the program *Sanford & Son*, the character of Aunt Esther was a version of the mammy character, in the sense that she was lovable but overbearing; constantly swinging her purse at anyone whom she deemed offended her. On the program, *What’s Happening!*, Roger’s mother, Mabel Thomas (played by Mabel King) as well the owner of the local hangout shop, Shirley (played by Shirley Hemphill) with their vivacious personalities, sass, as well as the fact that both of these women were of large stature; these women

were reminiscent of the mammy stereotype. The same was true of the African American situational comedy *Nell*. Nell was one of the perfect examples of the modernized mammy. She was big, loud, and loving towards the children in her care – as quick with her tongue, as she was to give hugs. In the later century, another modern mammy was found in *The Parkers* in the character of Nikki Parker. Nikki was suggestive of the mammy stereotype as a big woman, brusque but in a loving manner. Nikki differed though in that she was shown striving for a higher education through her attendance in Santa Monica College.

### ***Pickaninnies***

The African American situational comedies also renovated the stereotype of the pickaninny within various programs. In the program *Diff'rent Strokes*, the majority of comedic antics started with the young character of Arnold. With his wide eyes, easily excitable nature, and his catchphrase of “Whatcha talkin’ about?!”, Arnold was the prime example of modern pickaninny. The program of *Webster* presented another version of the stereotype. While Webster did not have the catchphrases of Arnold of *Diff'rent Strokes*, he was that cute, doe-eyed African American pickaninny that America remembered from minstrel shows. The modern portrayal of the pickaninny was not limited to male characters. *The Parkers* character of Kim was dimwitted and lovable, very much like an older female version of a pickaninny.

## *Coons*

With their mischievous behavior and sluggish behavior, the coon, also known as the buffoon, was reprised in African American situational comedies in different forms. *Sanford & Son* had Fred's friend Grady, who epitomized the stereotypical coon, with his lazy mannerisms and rascal-like behavior. As the eldest son on the program *Good Times*, J. J., while a talented artist, was also the personification of the minstrel stereotype of the coon. With his over-exaggerated mannerisms, his wide-toothed smile, and his spasmodic shouting of his catch phrase "Dy-no-mite!" J.J.'s clownish behavior was overwhelming. John Amos (James Evans, Sr.) and Esther Rolle (Florida Evans) found this depiction to be so debasing, as well as other aspects of the show, that they eventually left the series.

*The Jeffersons'* character of George Jefferson was another modern version of the coon. With his conniving attitude and his boisterous behavior, the coon stereotype was again brought to life. Steven Q. Urkel, on the program *Family Matters*, was an interesting depiction of a buffoon. The character of Urkel was paradoxical in that though he was intellectually smarter than the other characters on the show his character was the biggest buffoon on the program. Constantly tripping over things and causing mishaps, Urkel seemed incapable of acting conventionally.

### ***The Father Figure***

The majority of African American situational comedies have had a father figure in one form or another within the program. At times, the father was abrasive and harsh in his dealings with his children and others within the program as in Fred Sanford in *Sanford & Son* or George Jefferson in *The Jeffersons*. Other fathers were disciplinarians, some stricter than others. Heathcliff Huxtable of *The Cosby Show* had his own manner of dealing with his children's antics, usually through some activity that ended up teaching them a lesson, while James Evans of *Good Times* was more "old-school" – he felt no need to defend his actions, after all he was the father.

While in the early African American situational comedies, the father was a strict enforcing disciplinarian, this changed within the later comedies brought the father figure. He was no longer the domineering man of the seventies. His softer, loving side was displayed more frequently. Furthermore, not only was the loving side of the father figure more often displayed, the intelligence of the mother was brought to the forefront as well. She was extremely devoted and fond of her husband, but for all intent and purposes, she seemed to be the one in control of the household. A possible reason for the shift of the roles of the husband and wife is that American society, while

willing to watch African Americans on television, were not comfortable with seeing the aggressive, authoritative African American male in their household.

### ***New Stereotypes***

There has been the advent of new consistent roles within African American situational comedies. While still supporting the family theme, many of the programs have had new family setups. Single fathers have become common character on African American situational comedies. Programs like *My Brother and Me*, *Smart Guy*, and *All About the Andersons* all had single fathers attempting to raise their families and maintain a personal life, a theme that is familiar, but usually with single mothers as the parent. African American situational comedies have also introduced the interracial character into their format in different ways. Some programs have biracial characters within their cast, like Lynn on *Girlfriends*. Others have reverted back to a format introduced in *The Jeffersons*, that of the biracial couple.

There has also been a reinforcement of the independent woman character role. The program *Girlfriends* has four women, successful in their respective fields (for the most part) examining their lives both personally and professionally. *Eve* has three entrepreneurial women with their own fashion company trying to figure out themselves

and the opposite sex. While these women are financially independent, it is interesting to note that they still feel as though they need that male counterpart to feel complete.

## **Relationship between Decades, Themes and Character Roles**

### *Seventies*

Interestingly, a relationship developed between the decades in which certain program themes appeared and the characters that were in the programs of that time. The African American situational comedies of the seventies were alike, with exceptions like *Sanford & Son* and *Good Times*, in that they were about displaying a world of diversity. The casts were members of different ethnic groups – Whites and African Americans – living in a world of harmony. There was a desire for these programs to appeal to more than just the African American audiences.

Programs such as *Diff'rent Strokes* and *Webster* had African American children adopted by White families, supposedly to live better lives both economically and emotionally. Other programs such as *Julia*, *The Jeffersons* and *Benson* were about African Americans striving for better lives, which meant lives that were similar to the White society around them. The African Americans of the comedies of the seventies were also of the lower class category. Of poorer backgrounds than their White

counterparts, African Americans of the situational comedies of the seventies were struggling and hoping to make better lives for themselves.

One of the character roles that arose was that of the disciplinarian father figure, and for some programs. James Evans of *Good Times* was the epitome of the tough, yet loving father – strict with his children, but loving when they needed him. George Jefferson of *The Jeffersons*, when not playing the racist entrepreneur was a father who demanded a lot of his son, Lionel, but at the same time, always let him know that he was loved.

### ***Eighties***

The African American situational comedies of the mid – late eighties were family oriented. Differing from the comedies of the seventies, the casts of the African American situational comedies of the eighties were all African American. Programs like *The Cosby Show*, *227*, and *Family Matters* celebrated the trials and tribulations of the family and the comical situations that arose within the family.

The eighties introduced American society to the character role of the nosy neighbor. The comedy *227* had Pearl, while the program *Family Matters* had Steve Urkel. They were examples of neighbors, who had good intentions, but went about

them in uncouth manner. Rose was the abrasive, but concerned neighbor, sitting in her window spying on the neighborhood and willing to report all that she had seen. Steven Q. Urkel was the neighbor looking for attention that he was not getting from home. Constantly barging into the home of the Winslows, his neighbors, Steve caused confusion through his clumsiness and his obsession with the oldest daughter, Laura.

### ***Nineties***

In the nineties, the African American situational comedies were a mix of programming. The concern of the programs was no longer to address the diverse American audience, but to get as many programs featuring African Americans on the air as possible. In addition, the African American character roles were of middle class status. There was still the desire for a better life for the children. However, there were few displays of the poverty familiar in the programs of the seventies. There were family-oriented programs like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Thea*, *Sister, Sister*, *The Parent 'Hood* and *The Hughleys*. What was interesting was that the parents for most of the programs were of the single mother households, than the two parent households.

There were also programs that examined the personal relationships of African Americans amongst one another like *Out All Night*, *Living Single* and *Malcolm & Eddie*. Examining the "buddy" relationship between African Americans was an all too

common theme within these programs. *Living Single* had four African American females interacting on a consistent basis as they tried to find their soul mates, as well as discover themselves.

The humor of the programs of the nineties was also more abrasive than their predecessors were. This was due in part to the comedians who were part of the casts. *Malcolm & Eddie* had comedian Eddie Griffin as one of the co-stars. While his material would and could not be as raunchy as his stand-up routine, but the jokes and the humor of the program were for an older audience. *Martin* was of the same scenario. Martin Lawrence as a comedian was not the same as Bill Cosby. His humor was crude and “in-your-face”. This humor was taken over into his show as well. The programs of the nineties were also more willing to make fun of African Americans themselves. Humor was directed at the stereotypes and misconceptions often associated with African Americans.

### ***2000 and Beyond***

The year 2000 brought African American situational comedies that were concentrated on two networks, UPN and the WB. Interestingly enough, African Americans within these programs were of the upper-middle status. If the character themselves was not of higher status, their parents/guardians were. *The Bernie Mac*

*Show* has the comedian Bernie Mac playing himself, a well-known comedian raising his sister's children. *Half & Half* have stepsisters, sharing a rich father, trying to forge a relationship between themselves and the other members of their family.

The single parent character role, as well as that of the independent woman, has traveled in to the situational comedies of the twenty-first century. The programs of 2000 have also integrated their casts more than those of the nineties. They have included Hispanics (*All About the Andersons*), Whites (*Girlfriends*, *Eve*, *One on One*), even Iranians (*Whoopi*). The diversity has not ended there. Interracial relationships, as well as interracial characters have become the norm for these programs.

With all these changes and introductions into the world of African American situational comedies, one wonders how the American audience has received it. The next chapter attempts at examining audience reception and perception of African American situational comedies from the past to the present. This is done through an internet survey with analysis conducted via the statistical program, SPSS.

## **Chapter 8. Methodology and Analysis**

As the world has moved into the twenty-first century, American society would like to believe that the interpersonal relationships amongst its members have improved as well. To further these images of blissful relationships within American society, the American entertainment industry broadcasted programs various members of society interacting and commingling in healthy and productive relationships. This was no different from the entertainment television of the past, but in the twenty-first century, there was an increase in the visual representation of African Americans within situational comedies. African Americans were seen in increasing numbers as the main and supporting characters of their own situational comedies.

With this increase in African American visual representation, a reasonable expectation is that the accuracy behind the representation would change as well. The question arises as to whose version of accuracy is being represented. As with all opinions – every person has their own – therefore the visual representation on the television screen is reflective of a certain person, or certain peoples' opinions. As time progressed, not only did the representation of African Americans change on the

television, the demographics of the American viewing audience for African American situational comedies changed as well.

Before continuing, the reader should be reminded that the majority of the programs in the 1980s were centered around establishing diversity on television (diverse casts and forced interrelationships among different ethnic groups). These shows were found on different networks. The majority of the programs introduced in the 1990s and 2000 consisted of casts that were predominantly African American and are found on the same two networks (WB and UPN – known informally as “U Peoples Network” in reference to its’ large amount of African American programming). The only two programs of the 1990s and 2000 that are located on other networks are *My Wife and Kids* and *The Bernie Mac Show*.

### **Research Question**

To initiate an analysis of American society’s attitude towards African Americans, the most convenient method of analysis was a mass survey. This would permit a larger and more diverse population for examination. The concern for the surveyor was to create a survey that would analyze both the demographics of the audience for African American programming and the attitudes of American society towards African Americans, without creating any foreseeable bias. To accomplish

this, this survey looked at the audience demographics of African American programming from the 1960s to the present day. The intention of the survey was to answer the question: “Does the change in demographics in the audience of African American situational comedic programs reflect a changing attitude of American society towards African Americans?”

## **Hypothesis**

The survey was conducted to test the following hypothesis:

H<sub>1</sub>:

There will be a change in the demographics of African American situational comedic programs.

H<sub>0</sub>:

There will be no change in the demographics of African American situational comedic programs.

## **Conceptual Definitions**

Before continuing with the results and findings of the survey, clarification of some of the variables used within the survey is needed. These are the terminology of the variables by which most of society is familiar with. These definitions, as interpreted by the surveyor are listed in Table 8.1. The majority of the definitions were taken from <http://www.merriam-webster.com>.

[Table 8.1. about here]

## **Operational Definitions**

Operational definitions are the manner in which variables within a survey are measured. In Table 8.2. are the operational definitions used for this particular survey. Each of the variables gave the respondent the choice of “Don’t Know” as a way to account for those participants, who for whatever reason, would choose not to answer the question.

[Table 8.2. about here]

## **Data**

The data for this survey were collected through a convenience snowball sampling technique via internet survey data-collecting site ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). The initial participants were graduate students at Georgetown University within the Communication, Culture, and Technology program, alumni of the University of Virginia, and alumni of New York City program Prep for Prep, as well as friends and family members of the author. A link to the survey was posted on several websites such as [ivillage.com](http://ivillage.com), [vibe.com](http://vibe.com), [blackrefer.com](http://blackrefer.com), and [poppolitics.com](http://poppolitics.com). Through a snowball effect, the survey then passed on to various other members of American society. The survey was open for approximately two months and 450 responses were collected.

## **Statistical Methodology**

For processing of the collected data from the survey, the statistical program SPSS was used. The data transferred from surveymonkey.com to SPSS were converted into numeric format. Issues arose with this conversion of data. There were some edits and changes done by the surveyor to assure efficiency and accuracy of the statistical analysis. Any participant who responded “No” to the first question (the statement asked whether the participant agreed to participate in the survey) was removed from the database. There were participants who gave more than one answer to a question. In those cases, the response of the higher/stronger value was chosen. Some participants answered only the first five questions and then opted not to answer any of the other questions. These responses were deleted as well.

### ***Dependent Variable***

The dependent variable – the premise that is to be predicted – is the change in audience demographics in African American situational comedies. This variable was measured by looking at the sample’s feelings of accuracy regarding the various African American comedies listed.

### ***Independent Variables***

The independent variables – those factors that are used to predict the dependent variable – within the survey examined the change in attitude of American society towards African Americans. This variable was measured by examining the responses of the participants regarding their attitudes towards the relationships between African Americans and the rest of American society.

### **Results**

The SPSS program was used to analyze the data. The majority of the participants were college educated, between 26 – 35 years of age, male, African American, and grew up in what they deemed a suburban environment.

The data were further analyzed for patterns, reliability, and correlations. For consistency, the data were examined according to those who regularly watched the African American situational comedies. As expected, African Americans were the largest audience demographic to watch the television programs. The numbers of those who regularly watched African American situational comedies increased amongst the other ethnic groups, especially amongst those programs that took place in the 1980s (e.g. *The Cosby Show*, *227*, *Amen*, etc.) and the first African American situational

comedy, *Julia*. The number of White participants who watched the African American comedies that were introduced in the 1990s decreased with the exception of the programs *My Wife and Kids* and *The Bernie Mac Show*, where the numbers increased for the white participants who watched the programs. The numbers increased significantly among those viewers who considered themselves White. The most consistent increase in audience demographics was amongst those who consider themselves Asian.

### ***Factor Analysis***

Further scrutinization through factor analysis illustrated that there were further connections amongst the programs. The factor analysis examined if there were underlying patterns in the frequency of watching the programs. The rotated component matrix sorted the programs into nine different factors. It was interesting that each factor corresponded to certain programs within particular decades. For example, the programs that grouped within factor 2 were created in the 1980s. This type of association establishes that there is a connection between the responses given by the participants towards the frequency questions and the programs themselves. The programs that were associated with one another according to the factor analysis were then grouped together to create new variables. Table 8.3. exhibits the breakdown of

the programs from the factor analysis. To broaden the examination of the correlation between these programs, regression analysis was performed.

***Regression Analysis: Frequency of Watching African American Situational Comedies***

Regression analysis determined if there was a relationship between certain predictors, the frequency that programs of certain decades were watched, and the level to which the participants of the survey deemed that the programs were accurate depictions of African Americans. Regression analysis permits the examiner to look beyond correlation to determine causality, if evident. The predictors were ethnic group, age, and educational level. Because the largest number of participants considered themselves either African American or White, these were the ethnic groups examined. Table 8.4. illustrates the findings of the analysis for the frequency in which the programs were watched.

Reported in the table are the number of cases SPSS used for each variable, the standard coefficient (which tells the strength of the relationship between the dependent variable and the given predictor), and the adjusted  $R^2$  (the percentage of variation in the dependent variable that is explained by the model). Education was coded with those with some high school education were the lowest value and those with law/medical school degrees with the highest value. For age, the participants were

broken into groups (18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-54, 55-66, and 67+). The first group had the lowest value, with the value increasing with each group. The frequency of watching the African American situational comedies was coded so that those who never watched the programs had the lowest value and those who always watched the programs had the highest value.

[Table 8.4. about here]

### **Results via Predictors**

For the predictor Black, most of the coefficients were statistically significant in a positive relationship, which means that Blacks were consistently watching African American situational comedies throughout time. Specifically, the coefficients that were statistically significant were with the programs of the Eighties, Early Nineties (II), Nineties, Late Nineties and both parts of the programs in 2000. The relationship between Blacks and the programs of the Nineties, Late Nineties and both parts of 2000 was stronger, being statistically significant at  $p \leq .01$ .

For the predictor White, most of the coefficients were also statistically significant – some stronger than others. All of the coefficients were negative indicating that Whites as an ethnic group rarely watched any African American situational comedies, regardless of the decade. What was interesting was that the

coefficients steadily increased (-.255, -.248, -.273, -.089, -.432, -.333, -.312, and -.413) demonstrating that White became more likely to not watch the African American situational comedies as time progressed.

The predictor of education was similar to that of White. The majority of its coefficients were negative and statistically significant. These results revealed that those of higher education did not consistently watch African American situational comedies throughout time.

The predictor of age did not have the same consistency as other predictors. For the programs of the Seventies, the coefficient of .290 was statistically significant at  $p \leq .01$ . This meant that those in the older age groups did watch the African American situational comedies in the Seventies. However, the coefficients for the programs in the Early Nineties (I), Late Nineties, and 2000 were statistically significant at  $p \leq .01$  and they were negative, meaning that those within the older age groups were more likely to not watch the African American situational comedies.

### ***Regression Analysis: Accuracy of African American Situational Comedies***

The next step was to perform a regression analysis on the participants' stances on the accuracy of the African American situational comedies of each decade. For the accuracy variable, those participants who deemed that the programs were never accurate were in the low value, and those who thought that the programs were always accurate were in the high value. Table 8.5. presents the findings. Again, the predictors were ethnic group, age and education.

[Table 8.5. about here]

#### **Results via Predictors**

For the predictor of Black, the only statistically significant coefficient was with the variable Early Nineties (I). With a coefficient of  $-.269$ , this meant that those in the ethnic group of Black felt that the programs in the Early Nineties (I) were not accurate depictions of African Americans.

The predictor of White followed a similar pattern as in the previous analysis. Again, all of the coefficients were statistically significant and negative, meaning that those within the ethnic group of White felt that African American situational comedies were not accurate depictions of African Americans. Once more, the coefficients

increased as time progressed showing that they felt that the programs in the later years were approaching accuracy.

The predictor of education was statistically significant for the programs within Seventies, Early Nineties (II), Nineties, late Nineties, and 2000. The coefficient for the programs within the Seventies was  $-.212$ , which meant those with a higher education did not feel that the programs within the Seventies were accurate depictions of African Americans. The coefficients for the other decades were positive, but not extremely high in value, which suggested that those with middle ground education (college level) felt that the programs within these decades were accurate depictions of African Americans.

For the predictor of age, the statistically significant coefficients fell under the programs of the Early Nineties (I), Nineties, and Late Nineties. These coefficients were all negative reflecting that those within the older age group felt that these programs were not accurate depictions of African Americans.

### ***Regression Analysis: Improvement of the Relationships between African Americans and the rest of American society***

The final analysis prepared was looking at the participants' stance on how much, if at all, did they agree with the statement that the relationships between African Americans and the rest of American society had improved since 1992. The year 1992 was chosen as it was the year that the highly acclaimed African American situational comedy *The Cosby Show* ended its tenure on American television. The highest value was given to those who strongly agreed with the statement and the lowest value was given to those who strongly disagreed with the statement. Again, the predictors were ethnic group, age and education.

[Table 8.6. about here]

#### **Results via Predictors**

The predictors with statistically significant coefficients were Black, White, and age. The coefficient for Black was  $-.173$ , which was statistically significant at  $p \leq .05$ , which meant that those within the ethnic group Black disagreed with the statement that the relationships between African Americans and the rest of society had improved since 1992. However, those within the ethnic group White felt that the relationship had improved with a coefficient of  $.128$ , though this coefficient was only approaching statistical significance. With a coefficient of  $-.109$ , and statistically significant at  $p \leq$

.05, the predictor of age demonstrated that those within the older age group did not agree that the relationship between African Americans and the rest of American society had improved since 1992.

### ***Limitations***

Due to the large amount of questions within the survey, many people tired and stopped answering questions later in the survey. This affected the sample to be examined for certain portions of the analysis. Also, while there was a large number of participants, most of them were 18 – 30 years of age. This affected the responses to the programs within the Seventies and Eighties, for many of these participants were either too young to view these programs, or not even born yet.

Given unlimited resources, it would have been informative to speak with producers and actors within African American situational comedies to see what they feel has been their impact on American society regarding their representation of African Americans on American television.

These results did help to support the initial hypothesis. There was a change in the audience demographics of the African American situational comedies throughout the decades, as well as a positive change in the feelings of accuracy in African

American programming. What does this information mean for the future of African American situational comedies – in fact, what does it mean for the future of African American programming in general? This and more is discussed in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 9. Conclusion**

Upon researching the extent to which the African American situational comedies of the twenty-first century were modern manifestations of historical stereotypes, various things were realized by the author. When dealing with any minority representation, especially that of African Americans, the ghosts of the past will always be present in the images on American television. While the physical imagery has changed from that remembered in minstrels, the meaning and implication behind them has not.

It must be remembered that within American society, the majority of the American entertainment industry is, and has been, under the control of older white males. With this knowledge in mind, “If media gatekeepers are generally white and male, it is not surprising that the messages they permit to pass through their media gate support their own views of the world, not that that view is based on a concept of white male supremacy that they, too, have been taught” (Dates and Pease 81). With no change in who is controlling the industry, one cannot expect the imagery to change. Mass economical and political events, such as the Civil Rights movement, have had

their impact in changing the images on television, but these events do not occur on a regular basis. African Americans cannot wait for the next big event to look for change.

### **What is the “Right” Representation of African Americans?**

In examining African American representation, there is an implication that there is a “correct” depiction of African Americans. The issue arises that “when black American attempt to define what it means to be black, they delimit the possibilities of what blackness can be” (Johnson 19). This concern arose with programs like *The Cosby Show*. In its insistence on not being seen as a stereotypical African American situational comedy, the producers, Bill Cosby in particular, stated what the proper image of African Americans was to be. By limiting the reflections of African Americans on the program, *The Cosby Show*, to some, gave the impression that to be upper – middle class and highly educated was the paradigm that all African Americans should aspire to. What African Americans as a community have to realize is that they “cannot ask the dominant culture to accept their difference as Others nor accept their humanity until black Americans accept the differences among themselves” (Johnson 19).

### **The Influence of *The Cosby Show***

Exploring the programs that followed *The Cosby Show* produced an interesting discovery. The influence of the program has not been as monumental as many would

believe. With the exception of the comedy *A Different World*, most of the programs that followed *The Cosby Show* did not follow its lead. These programs reverted to the old familiar formats – programs where the characters fit into the modernized stereotypical roles that America was familiar with.

So why has there been so much research and exploration done on *The Cosby Show*? The author believes that *The Cosby Show* was an anomaly, a program that most of American society deemed “good television”. The fact that program had an all African American cast has allowed those within the television industry to use it as the example that not all representation of African Americans on American television has been stereotypical and prejudicial. They fail to acknowledge that *The Cosby Show* was one program out of many, and that its influence did not extend to other programs. *The Cosby Show* did influence the influx of African American comedians into situational comedies.

### **Why Situational Comedies?**

As writing this work, the author came to realize that when discussing African American representation on American television, most works examined the arena of the situational comedies as well. As stated earlier in this work, there are a greater number of situational comedies on American television than any other genre. This

number provides a researcher with the possibility of collecting more data and reaching a larger audience. This may explain why researchers choose to look at situational comedies, but it does not explain why the entertainment industry has felt comfortable in portraying stereotypical roles within this genre.

Herman Gray argues that dramas have progressed in their representation of minorities with multicultural casts, but this is in the workplace setting. When looking at the domestic world of family and friends, the industry has opted to reflect the African American household in the situational comedy setting because “there seems to be a general apprehension (if not outright fear) on the business side about the financial risks involved in pursuing racial crossover dreams” (Gray, “Black Representation” 119). The entertainment industry does not see it as a profitable enterprise to reflect the African American household in a non-comical manner.

### **Next Steps**

With the entertainment industry being comfortable with the representations of African American in situational comedies, African Americans will need to look beyond the genre of comedy and demand their place within other genres. Insisting upon all African American casts within other genres, such as drama, and proving that they can be successful is one way to achieve this. Cable channels have had programs

with African American casts (*The Wire* on HBO, *Soul Food* on Showtime) and these programs have achieved critical acclaim. Getting programs similar to these on local channels must be the next objective for African Americans.

Acknowledging that there is no one true representation of African Americans, another possible solution is to get as many different representations on American television as possible. Bombarded with all the different aspects that compose African American culture, the imagery and possibly, the perception of African Americans will change as well. This idea works under the assumption that there would be a change in thinking of those in charge of the entertainment industry.

Another option is for African Americans to establish themselves within another arena altogether. The world of the Internet has opened new opportunities for everyone. As technology advances, more and more prospects and opportunities will arise outside of the established entertainment industry. The objective for African Americans is to get in on these opportunities from the start and not wait to be invited in.

## Chapter 10. Methodology Survey Questions

1. Please read the following statement:

By continuing, I agree to participate in this survey. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, and that I may discontinue my participation at any time. All data will be reported in the aggregate, and it will be impossible to identify any single participant.

Yes

No

2. How often do you watch TV every day?: (in hours)

3. Do you enjoy comedic television shows?

Yes

No

Don't Know

4. Do you watch cable television?:

Yes

No

Don't Know

5. The following are a list of comedic programs that have aired or are currently on the air.

How often do/did you watch the following programs:

*The African American situational comedies from 1968 – present were listed here.*

6. How often do/did you watch reruns of these comedic shows?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Regularly
- All the time
- Don't Know

7. How often do/did you watch the regular programming of these comedic shows?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Regularly
- All the time
- Don't Know

8. Please rate how much you agree with the following statements:

- American entertainment television accurately depicts everyday life.
- Relationships amongst African Americans and the rest of society have improved since 1992.
- African Americans are represented in equal numbers on American entertainment television.

9. For those shows that you have ever watched, please rate how much you feel/felt that the shows are/were accurate depictions of African Americans.

10. Please rate how often you think that African Americans are accurately depicted on American entertainment television programs.

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Regularly
- All the time
- Don't know

11. With what gender/sex do you associate yourself?:

- Male
- Female
- Don't know

12. With which ethnicity do you identify with:

- Asian
- White-Hispanic
- Latin American
- White
- Hispanic
- Black/African American
- Latino
- Native American
- Caribbean/Caribbean American
- Don't know
- Black-Hispanic
- Other (please specify)

13. What is your educational level?:

- Less than high school
- High school degree
- Some college
- College degree
- Some post-graduate work
- Post-graduate degree
- Law or medical school degree
- Don't know

14. Please enter your age:

15. In which geographic location did you grow up?:

- City/Urban

- Suburban
- Country
- Other (please specify)

## Appendix. Methodological Tables

Table 8.1. Conceptual Definitions

VARIABLE	DEFINITION
<b>Ethnicity</b>	of or relating to large groups of people classed according the common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background
<b>Age</b>	the time of life at which some particular qualification, power, or capacity arises or rests
<b>Sex</b>	either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively as female or male
<b>Educational Level</b>	the level in which one has had the accessibility to develop mentally, morally, or aesthetically especially by instruction
<b>African American Situational Comedic Programs</b>	those scripted comedic programs shown on American television that had/have the central character(s) played by an African American and/or the storyline was/is centered around an African American
<b>Attitudes towards African Americans</b>	the participants' feeling as to whether or not the mental position of American society about African Americans has changed – is this change positive or negative?
<b>Geographic Location</b>	the particular geographic region that the participant felt most represented where they were raised

Table 8.2. Operational Definitions

VARIABLES	DEFINITIONS
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black/African American</li> <li>• Hispanic</li> <li>• Black-Hispanic</li> <li>• White-Hispanic</li> <li>• White</li> <li>• Asian</li> <li>• Native American</li> <li>• Latino</li> <li>• Caribbean/Caribbean-American</li> <li>• Latin American</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>
<b>Age</b>	This variable was filled in by the participant, with the option to skip this question if the participant was not comfortable answering it.
<b>Sex</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male</li> <li>• Female</li> </ul>
<b>Educational Level</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less than high school</li> <li>• High school degree</li> <li>• Some college</li> <li>• College degree</li> <li>• Some post-graduate work</li> <li>• Post-graduate degree</li> <li>• Law or medical school degree</li> </ul>
<b>Geographic Location</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City/Urban</li> <li>• Suburban</li> <li>• Country</li> <li>• Other (the participant was permitted to write in their geographic location if they felt that none of the provided choices met their profile)</li> </ul>
<b>Hours Spent Watching Television</b>	This variable was filled in by the participant with the option to skip this question if they were not comfortable answering it.
<b>Cable Television</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>

Table 8.2. Operational Definitions (cont.)

<p><b>Attitudes towards African Americans</b></p>	<p>This variable was measured by asking the participant to measure how much they agreed or disagreed with the three following statements:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. American entertainment television accurately depicts everyday life;</li> <li>2. Relationships amongst African Americans and the rest of society have improved since 1992;</li> <li>3. African Americans are represented in equal numbers on American entertainment television.</li> </ol> <p>The rating scale was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly disagree</li> <li>• Disagree</li> <li>• Neutral</li> <li>• Agree</li> <li>• Agree</li> <li>• Strongly agree</li> </ul>
<p><b>African American Situational Comedies</b></p>	
<p>This is the listing of the programs that the participants were asked questions about. The questions surrounding the programs were if the participant had ever watched and how often they watched the program in question.</p>	
<p>Julia Sanford &amp; Son Good Times The Jeffersons What's Happening! Diff'rent Strokes Benson Gimme A Break Webster The Cosby Show What's Happening Now! 227 Amen A Different World Frank's Place Family Matters The Fresh Prince of Bel Air</p>	<p>Roc Hangin' with Mr. Cooper Martin Out All Night Thea Living Single Where I Live Sister, Sister Me and the Boys My Brother and Me On Our Own The Parent 'Hood The Wayans Bros. In the House Malcolm &amp; Eddie The Jamie Foxx Show The Steve Harvey Show</p>
	<p>Cosby Moesha Smart Guy The Hughleys Linc's The Parkers Girlfriends One on One My Wife and Kids The Bernie Mac Show Half &amp; Half Eve Whoopi All of Us All About the Andersons The Tracy Morgan Show</p>

Table 8.2. Operational Definitions (cont.)

<b>Accurate Depictions</b>	The participants were asked to rate how accurate a depiction they felt each of the African American programs were of African Americans. The scale was: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strongly disagree</li><li>• Disagree</li><li>• Neutral</li><li>• Agree</li><li>• Strongly agree</li></ul>
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Table 8.3. Factor Analysis Results

<b>DECADE</b>	<b>AFRICAN AMERICAN SITUATIONAL COMEDIES</b>
<b>Seventies</b>	Sanford & Son Good Times The Jeffersons What's Happening!
<b>Eighties</b>	Webster Gimme a Break Diff'rent Strokes Benson 227 A Different World Amen What's Happening Now! The Cosby Show
<b>Early Nineties Part I</b>	Sister, Sister Family Matters Fresh Prince Hangin' with Mr. Cooper
<b>Early Nineties Part II</b>	Me and the Boys On Our Own Where I Live My Brother and Me Linc's
<b>Nineties</b>	The Wayans Bros. The Jamie Foxx Show The Hughleys The Steve Harvey Show Roc The Parent 'Hood Martin

Table 8.3. Factor Analysis Results

<b>Late Nineties</b>	Thea In the House Malcolm & Eddie Out All Night Moesha Living Single Sparks Smart Guy
<b>2000</b>	The Tracy Morgan Show The Bernie Mac Show Whoopi All About the Andersons
<b>2000 Part II</b>	Eve One on One Half & Half All of Us Girlfriends My Wife and Kids The Parkers
<b>Exceptions</b>	Frank's Place Julia

Table 8.4. Regression Analysis of the Frequency of Watching African American Situational Comedies depending on Race, Education and Age

DECADES	Black	White	Education	Age	n	R <sup>2</sup>
SEVENTIES	.102	-.255**	-.078 <sup>#</sup>	.290**	307	.217
EIGHTIES	.157 <sup>#</sup>	-.248**	.034	.047	283	.139
EARLY NINETIES I	.085	-.273**	-.164**	-.258**	304	.206
EARLY NINETIES II	.186*	-.089	-.147*	-.010	275	.083
NINETIES	.188**	-.432**	-.133**	-.049	291	.369
LATE NINETIES	.259**	-.333**	-.135**	-.177**	279	.355
2000	.047	-.312**	-.061	.033	292	.118
2000 PART II	.208**	-.413**	-.113*	-.136**	289	.371
EXCEPTIONS	.073	-.107 <sup>#</sup>	.059	.610**	285	.405

\*p ≤ .05

\*\*p ≤ .01

<sup>#</sup>p approaching statistical significance

Table 8.5. Analysis of the Accuracy of African American Situational Comedies depending on Race, Education and Age

DECADES	Black	White	Education	Age	n	R <sup>2</sup>
SEVENTIES	-.121	-.234*	-.212**	-.009	174	.052
EIGHTIES	-.172	-.268 <sup>#</sup>	-.058	-.043	94	-.006
EARLY NINETIES I	-.269*	-.282*	.001	-.225*	132	.040
EARLY NINETIES II	-.333	-.441 <sup>#</sup>	.286 <sup>#</sup>	-.268	28	-.014
NINETIES	.015	-.374*	.156 <sup>#</sup>	-.203 <sup>#</sup>	78	.120
LATE NINETIES	-.068	-.453 <sup>#</sup>	.322 <sup>#</sup>	-.319 <sup>#</sup>	38	.111
2000	-.245	-.469 <sup>#</sup>	.322 <sup>#</sup>	-.143	33	.000
2000 PART II	-.097	-.458*	.028	-.247 <sup>#</sup>	63	.132
EXCEPTIONS	-.342	-.347	.244 <sup>#</sup>	.443**	40	.270

Table 8.6. Analysis of the Improvement of the Relationships between African Americans and the rest of American society depending on Race, Education and Age

	<b>RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE REST OF AMERICAN SOCIETY HAVE IMPROVED SINCE 1992</b>
<b>Black</b>	-.173*
<b>White</b>	.128 <sup>#</sup>
<b>Education</b>	.008*
<b>Age</b>	-.109*
<hr/>	
<b>n</b>	312
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.082

\*p ≤ .05

\*\*p ≤ .01

<sup>#</sup>p approaching statistical significance

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