



In With The Huxables And Out With Amos 'n' Andy **Improving African American Representations on Television**

by **Robin R. Means Coleman**

Already a half-century of commercial, network television had come and gone before, and it wasn't until 1995, that we were offered the FIRST dramatic portrayal of an intact, traditional Black family through CBS's series *Under One Roof* starring James Earl Jones, Joe Morton, and Vanessa Bell Calloway as the Langston family. Why did it take five long decades for dramatic television to discover that Black families can be depicted as modern, middle-class, whole, warm and loving, and absent of the many violent, ghetto-centric, and buffoonish stereotypes that so beleaguer African American imagery? The answer, predictably, rests with the majority of television viewers being White and the ratings game. Will White viewers tune in faithfully to follow the life of a family that does not look like them? Sadly, the answer for this series was "no," as after just a few episodes *Under One Roof* was canceled.

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Indeed, the Langstons hardly were met with the approving welcome that the *Cosby Show's* Huxtables garnered. Ah, yes, America's favorite TV family, the Huxtables, who, many in America saw as "just happening to be Black." However, the Huxtables, unlike the Langstons, were presented in the realm of the comedic. In fact, television's history reveals that series featuring Black families are quite popular within the genre of comedy (e.g., *Good Times*, *Family Matters*, *The Wayans Brothers*). Depicted frequently as clowns and cut-ups, comedy rarely requires that the African American and Black culture be taken seriously. In my book *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (2000, Garland Publishing), I present research with African American viewers of Black situation comedies (those series that prominently feature Black characters and Black culture such as *Sanford and Son*, *Roc*, and *Moesha*). These viewers work to support predominately Black series as they like to see African Americans included on television, but, I found, they reject much of the behaviors depicted. These "resisting spectators" shared their concerns about the images with me, and I worked with them to uncover some actions that can be taken to improve the Black condition in media. It is my hope that the suggestions offered here will be useful to all that want to affect change by promoting improved African American images.

In my study, I found no lack of viewers who expressed great disappointment over the portrayals. They identified depictions of the absent father, the womanizer, and the single, welfare mother. One viewer I interviewed, Donny, a 45 year old sanitation worker, summed up the stereotypical representations he often sees: "Like fools. Like clowns. Buffoons. We can make you laugh. Either a clown, or a crook, or some pimp. Everything is just negative. They [the media industry] gives us entertainment. You can sing for me and you can make me laugh. But we ain't the Amos and Andys, and we ain't the J.J., and we ain't the Martins."

So what needs to be changed and what can we do? Some of the viewers I interviewed concluded that the stereotyping problem lies with who controls media. Very often those that create, produce, and write for Black television series are non-African Americans. Robyn, a 42 year old small business owner, observes: I think that because we don't control enough media, we don't have any say so. I think the media is White controlled. Somebody has to make a decision about what goes on the air and we don't hold those kinds of positions to make decisions.

Today, viewers dissatisfied with portrayals can link with the NAACP and other organizations or they can begin their own grassroots boycott by recruiting friends, family, and co-workers to tune out the negative and tune into ONLY those shows that represent African Americans well.

In 1999 the NAACP began a campaign to promote diversity within the media industry infrastructure and to improve African American representations. The network called for a "brown out," a viewer boycott, of the major television networks, thereby, boycotting the commercials that support programming. The NAACP demanded that the media hire more people of color and to begin to rid television of the stereotypes so frequently assigned to Blacks. Today, viewers dissatisfied with portrayals can link with the NAACP and other organizations or they can begin their own grassroots boycott by recruiting friends, family, and co-workers to tune out the negative and tune into ONLY those shows that represent African Americans well. Such initiatives mean that letters should be written to the networks to let them know what you want changed. More importantly, a copy of those letters should also be sent to the advertisers that support a particular problematic show. Advertisers should be told that you will not support a company or buy its products if it continues to support programming that houses Black stereotypes and/or support a network that fails to employ African Americans in leadership positions. Viewers should also contact civil rights organizations and media watchdog groups to alert them to offending representations.

The viewers I interviewed in my study called for a change in programming content. Claire, a 46 year old social worker, clarified that the "positive" should include programming that works to celebrate African American history, culture, rituals, and lifestyles while at the same time shedding disrespectful communication: "A lot less 'smart-aleckyness.' More positive images showing them doing things to promote the Black community. I think they need to dwell more on our positive accomplishments. I mean, even if it's a situation comedy there should be an emphasis on our culture. Some of these shows, they don't show any Black art. They don't refer to Black people as being anybody of any real significance, you know... all this smart-alecky comedy stuff. Garbage!"

For viewers who want to affect change, before becoming pro-active by writing letters to networks and advertisers and tuning out offending series, they must be informed about how and why African Americans ended up in this imagistic predicament. Robert Townsend and Spike Lee with their respective films Hollywood Shuffle and Bamboozled worked to shed light on how industry executives perpetuate stereotypes in media.

Viewers should understand that the source of much of the situation comedy representations is the troubling Blackface minstrel performances of the 18th and 19th centuries. For example, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, White minstrel performers who appeared in Black face, were the creators of Amos 'n' Andy. They moved their Black face characterizations (then called Sam and Henry) from the minstrel stage to radio by mocking what they claimed was the African American dialect with dialogue such as "we ain't gonna have no luck, I can see dat 'cause Sam ain't luck and I'se wet him and I gues all dat bad luck's gonna come to us too..." Gosden and Correll's Amos 'n' Andy on radio, with its distortion of Black life and culture, became so popular that it was moved to television, but Black actors (tv dare not use White actors in Black face in the 1950s a decade the gave rise to the civil rights movement). The lesson: landmark Black situation comedies such as Amos 'n' Andy (and Beulah as well) were rooted in Black face minstrelsy - a legacy of behaviors and language that is still with the genre of situation comedy today. Viewers must understand that the present television racial ridicule is even more unacceptable today as it is a direct product of slave-era mockery.

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And what of the White viewers and their needed ratings alongside those of viewers of color? One

solution may be to decrease their opportunities to consume stereotypical representations and, instead, provide mainstream television with a lineup of quality Black programming. Marc, a 47 year old owner of a construction company, believes that continued White viewing of stereotypes is dangerous as the images reinforce bigotry and the belief that the Black culture is deficient: "Oh, they do have an influence on White people. When they show a Black trying to get out of a situation, and he's using his little schemes and his tricks, and all, and they're giggling and laughing about how they get out of it. When they show that, and now, you're a professional, and you go into your office to explain something has happened. This [White co-worker], I'm telling you, I'm telling you, this person is going to think that you're lying and you're distorting somewhere along the line, because 'Black folks do that.'"

Hence, a multiplicity of quality series, rather than just one here and there (as when *Under One Roof* was introduced) may work to educate those outside of Black culture about the contributions Blacks make. More, several offering at one time can work to make all viewers accustomed to seeing Black series of all genres, to include soap operas, games shows, police series, family dramas, and so on. Many of the viewers I interviewed saw great merit in demanding immediate change, as troubling images have already done considerable damage to non-Blacks perceptions of the race, as well as to the Black psyche. Immediate action means boycotting all programs that are problematic until the industry gets the message that such programs would not be tolerated. Similarly, this means boycotting those networks that fail to offer new Black series in as part of their Fall lineups.

These resistant spectators have introduced some insights that reveal African Americans' continued dissatisfaction over depictions of sexism, dysfunction, and buffoonery. They have revealed that they will no longer tolerate being seen as homogeneously deficient in morals, values, and behaviors. Born out of this frustration, they worked to determine how they (and we all) could become actively involved in solving the problem over imagistic mistreatments. The task becomes one where viewers communicate with the media industry, media watchdog groups, civil rights organizations, and advertisers. It is time to step up demands for Black image-makers and to remind Black performers to shun stereotypical roles. Viewers should become educated about the history of Black images. They should understand how those who create images, Blacks and Whites alike, have been socialized within a media culture that has treated Blacks differently. Similarly, as educated viewers, we should ask ourselves of each and every media program what kind of Black world is depicted here, what kind of people are depicted in this world (behaviors, values, attitudes), what do these depictions communicate about Black culture?

With the confinement of African Americans to the comedic, and with stereotyping plaguing African American representations, television viewers have much work to do, but it is necessary work. If we accept the call to action that those in this study have offered, it is now up to each of us to work to become a media savvy citizenry and to continue to demand better, more diverse imagery.

If not you, then who?

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