

ENG 280: First Place

The Black Family Matters

By Chyanne Davidson

In the sitcom *Family Matters*, an African American working class family is portrayed in their daily endeavors. *Family Matters* aired on September 22, 1989 on ABC and ran all the way until July 17, in 1998. The longer the show went on, the more it leaned into sketch comedy. Sketch comedy refers to short bits of ridiculous scenarios that are used to gain and keep viewers. This caused the show to move from realistic and relatable to outlandish and goofy. For this reason, only seasons one and two will be discussed. These two seasons work to establish the Winslow family as working class, showing the family's financial, occupational, and race issues. The Winslow family serves as a foundation for positive black working class portrayals. The use of their family dynamic can be compared to that of negative African American portrayals, and therefore marks a positive addition to the battle with the media against problematic black TV families. The show's deviation from standard working class and black representation exposes a societal bias towards those two groups. Modern day television shows attempt to do black families justice, but they fail to sufficiently distance themselves from stereotypes and boxed impressions of what makes the black family. Therefore, attention from working class black Americans is necessary to pinpoint, analyze, and further understand the issues these representations create. The Winslows' family values, emphasis on intellect, and overall portrayal create a blueprint for positive black and working class TV families.

American situational comedies have often represented lower classes in negative ways. The most popularly known example is *The Simpsons*, an animated show surrounding a working class family. The father and head of household is Homer Simpson, who is lazy and obviously

unintelligent. Most of the humor lies in Homer's inability to approach situations intelligently. Homer's obese, lazy, and unintelligent character is often used to represent working class fathers. Another aspect to this portrayal is how the rest of the family's intelligence passes the head of household. His wife appears to be more intelligent and often suffers because of him. Even the children are capable of more intellectually challenging things than Homer. Other examples of this include *Family Guy* and *The King of Queens*. There are even examples aimed at children such as *The Amazing Adventures of Gumball*. In showcasing characters like Homer Simpson, viewers are force-fed negative representations of the working class. The effects of these ideas and views of the working class can be shown by *Class Dismissed*, a film that analyzes and discusses working class depictions in American television. These negative portrayals have caused middle class to equate working class with being a failure. This replaces the reality of the systemic and involuntary aspects of poverty with the idea that a family struggles financially because of laziness, lack of will, and stupidity. TV representation directly oppose the reality of poverty, which often encompasses even people who work eight-hour shifts every day. The working class may have its share of laziness, but to generalize is not only problematic, but a sign of privilege. Those who look down on the working class usually do not experience or have the same issues. It is rare that old shows, like *Family Matters*, and movies avoid the lazy working class stereotype. Nevertheless, the shows that do should be appreciated for their more complex characters and storylines.

Family Matters started its nine-year run with a very personable approach. The first episode displays a large family—a family of five, aunt and her infant child, and now a grandmother—are forced together by circumstance (“The Mama Who Came to Dinner”). The household is obviously snug and with a limited amount of space. With this episode, we focus on family interactions and individual character traits. Carl is the head of household along with his wife. His mother's addition

to the household obviously strains him as she is bold and bossy towards him. Nevertheless, we can see how he carries himself up. He is torn when his mother's arrival forces him to choose between his two roles: family man and head of household. We watch Carl's attempt to be stern failing to overcome his family's contagious warmth. The comedy here comes from witty one-liners, clever puns, and Carl's suppression of anger rather than his stupidity.

The Winslow family often displays a positive and realistic family dynamic. For instance, Carl Winslow displays a loving family side as well as relatable emotional responses. Although Carl is a stocky character, his actions and words are not characterized by the likes of obesity and laziness. There are situations where Carl may feel lazy as well as determined which makes his character feel more realistic and humanlike. For example, well into the second season Carl begins to strive towards climbing the occupational ladder. With a promotion in mind, he invites his boss over in order to discuss matters ("Skip to My Lieu"). This exposes Carl's drive and ambition within his career. Carl not only becomes lieutenant, but he eventually goes on to become captain. Carl not only responds intelligently, but he also expresses concern for his children's intellectual development. In the fifth episode, Carl engages in his "incentive program." The children are gathered in the room in order to see their report cards. With every A in a class, the children receive five dollars ("Straight A's"). This is Carl's way of instilling the value of education within his children. This resembles the way my mother would encourage me to get good grades. Naturally, this is a more positive portrayal of the black family as well as the working class one.

The show's comedy often stems from their specific financial standing and thus provides clear evidence the family is within the struggling working class. In the show's second episode, the financial situation of the Winslows is further established. While it can be assumed that money would be an issue, it is never really talked about until this episode. Harriet Winslow loses her job

after taking Carl's advice and asking for a raise. Given that she's an elevator operator, the company chooses to update their machines rather than pay her more ("Two Income Family"). The title of the episode is ironic since they no longer have a two-income family. Most of the episode is the family worrying about money and becoming more money conscientious. There is even a scene where Mother Winslow, the grandmother, makes a meal she used to make during the depression. The episode shows Carl and Harriet's emotional support for one another. They sit together to discuss the family's future and if they can survive with only one income. Carl is not an aggressive idiot whose wife suffers from his lack of intelligence, but the exact opposite. Carl is a warm and caring man who leads with his wife closely behind. In the end Harriet does find a job, but this financial precarity continues throughout the season. For example, in the next episode Carl sits down at the kitchen table and prepares to pay bills. Each member comes to make conversation with him, but then pause to ask if he is paying bills. When he nods or says "yes," the family members all scurry off in a hurry as if to avoid a distant storm ("Short Story"). The water bill is relatively high, shocking Carl. This causes him to constantly monitor his family's water use. His obsession gets to the point of manipulating pipes in order to withhold water. This is a clear depiction of the Winslow family's working class status and its direct correlation with their behavior and the humor which comes from it. Another factor that impacts the Winslows is their race.

Most all black or mostly black TV shows are either good or bad for the black community. This is the point of conflict regarding the quality or value of the black TV family. In debating the quality of *Family Matters*, it will help to compare it with a more popular and often debated show: *The Cosby Show*. *The Cosby Show* is a sitcom starring an all-black family that resembles the Winslows. with the notable exception that the Huxtables are a fairly well-off middle class family.

In “Enlightened Racism of *The Cosby Show*,” Rachel Crooks discusses the racial tensions inside *The Cosby Show*. Crooks states: “The backgrounds of Cliff and Claire Huxtable suggested rather privileged lives ... and no mention to any racial barriers” (8). With this, Crooks breaks down a complex ideology behind the subtle racism in many shows.

In comparison, shows with obvious appeals to race become racially driven and eventually considered racist. For example, *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was a television show adapted from the radio in 1951. Initially the show was composed of white actors voicing these black characters, however, moving to radio required actual black actors. The NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, issued a statement on why they thought the show should be canceled. The NAACP stated: “[*Amos ‘n’ Andy*] strengthens the conclusion among uniformed and prejudiced people that Negroes are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest” (qtd. in Sanneh 43-44). This was a result of the criminal and “black buffoon” image that appeared throughout the show. This is an example of a white created or produced show that held stereotypical views of black people.

There is no surprise that *Amos ‘n’ Andy* would be considered problematic. However, *The Cosby Show* forms a strange parallel to it. *The Cosby Show* was created by Bill Cosby, an African American, and utilized a black psychiatrist and consultant (Crooks 9). In other words, the Huxtables are a black created representation of African Americans. Nevertheless, it suffers from criticism claiming it to be similar to “white people in blackface” (Innis 700). Enlightened racism surrounds Cosby’s intent to show a family without race. Crooks explains that by Cosby deemphasizing the Huxtables’ race, he ends up failing to discuss important social and economic problems (Crooks 5). Consequently, the characters are subject to racist tropes even when they are

not the obvious, inflated versions. The reason this is relevant is because a similar accusation can be put to *Family Matters*.

Generally, the race related issue with sitcoms is determined by the black family's consciousness of their and society's views of blackness. This race-related scrutiny was common for *The Cosby Show*. Bill Cosby's groundbreaking sitcom was under a decent amount of fire within the black community. Many argued that the show did not present a "realistic portrayal of a Black family" (Innis and Feagin 700). The point of conflict introduced here lies in the definition of blackness. In other words, the problem has been defined as a lack of black people doing black things, but what does it mean to "act black?" Does it mean use of slang, street style clothing, and obvious references to being black? Viewers deem a black family as "acting white" if they do not regularly take part in stereotypically black activities and behaviors. They claim that the lack of "blackness" is problematic and otherwise an inaccurate representation of the black family. Miriam Miranda Chitiga in her essay "Black Sitcoms: A Black Perspective" states: "The major implied message of such elements is that black families are incapable of living in reasonable harmonious two-parent households..." (50). Chitiga references this as the reason for the population's inability to swallow the Huxtables as a "believable" black family.

The idea of "acting white" is a detrimental façade that shapes the way an African American behaves. As a young black female, I was constantly teacher's pet and enjoyed things like reading, learning, and getting good grades. This behavior caused many of my (black) peers to refer to me as "acting white," an "inside out Oreo," or to exclaim things like "she thinks she's white." My educational drive, alternative appearance, and lack of slang in certain settings caused people to consider me not black enough. Many of these phrases preserve the idea that intelligence and occupational drive are uncharacteristic of African Americans. Since "acting white" creates

imagery regarding a loss of culture, it's obviously damaging to accuse intelligent or non-aggressive blacks of such an idea. Therefore, we should be careful to praiseshow like *Family Matters* for its acknowledgement of the black experience, not because it achieves some ideal of black behavior. As it makes no sense to claim I am not black, the same can be said for the characters within these shows. In short, the problem with shows like *The Cosby Show* is that they appear *unaffected* rather than undeterred by issues related to skin color.

In defining the actual problematic elements within a TV show, an inaccurate determination of quality can be avoided. It is problematic to display a family falsely in that they are unaffected by race or class issues within America. However, a loving family undeterred by said issues is actually a good thing. Undeterred simply means the family presses on despite the race and class issues. False representations not only affect the world's opinion of the black working class, but it also affects the black working class's views of themselves. It causes them to claim negative traits as what defines them as a black or a working class citizen. Shows like *Family Matters* identify blacks with values of family, love, and education. The shows are good because they avoid criminalizing blacks and defining working class citizens as buffoons. Acknowledging these tendencies could move the black working class toward more positive portrayals in not only shows and movies but also news platforms. By acknowledging this, blacks and the working class are able to see the box they are placed in via their representations. This is important as it is impossible to leave something you are unaware that you are in.

Works Cited

Chitiga, Miriam. "Black Sitcoms: A Black Perspectives." *Cercles*, 2003, pp. 46-58.

Class Dismissed: How TV Frames the Working Class. Directed by Loretta Alper, Media Education Foundation, 2005.

Crooks, Rachel. "Enlightened Racism and The Cosby Show." *The Owl*, Florida State University, 2014.

Inniss, Leslie B., and Joe R. Feagin. "The Cosby Show: The View From the Black Middle Class." *Journal of Black studies*, vol. 25, no. 6, 1995, pp. 187-194.

Sanneh, Kelefa. "Black in the Box: In Defense of African American Television." *Transition*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2001, pp. 38– 65.

Bibliography

- Blair, Elizabeth. "From 'Good Times' to 'Honey Boo Boo': Who is Poor on TV?" *NPR*, 5 May 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2014/08/05/337779030/from-good-times-to-honey-boo-boo-who-is-poor-on-tv>.
- Chitiga, Miriam. "Black Sitcoms: A Black Perspectives." *Cercles*, 2003, pp. 46-58.
- Class Dismissed: How TV Frames the Working Class*. Directed by Loretta Alper, Media Education Foundation, 2005.
- Coleman, Robin. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy*. Routledge, 2012.
- Crooks, Rachel, "Enlightened Racism and The Cosby Show." *The Owl*, Florida State University, 2014.
- Inniss, Leslie B., and Joe R. Feagin. "The Cosby Show: The View From the Black Middle Class." *Journal of Black studies*, vol. 25, no. 6, 1995, pp. 187-194.
- Jonas-Fowler, Joycelyn. *Is This Black Enough for You? A Comparative Analysis of African American Families Portrayed in Black Family Television Comedies Between 1980 and 2000*. Clark Atlanta University, 2018.
- Sanneh, Kelefa. "Black in the Box: In Defense of African American Television." *Transition*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2001, pp. 38– 65.
- Whitaker, Mark. "Blackness, 'Black-ish' and 'The Cosby Show': How Cliff Huxtable Changed American Culture." *Time*, 16 Sep. 2014, <https://time.com/3388134/black-ish-cosby-show-cliff-huxtable-american-culture/>.

Wilkerson, Isabel. "Television; Black Life on TV: Realism or Stereotypes?" *The New York Times*, 15 Aug. 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/08/15/arts/television-black-life-on-tv-realism-or-stereotypes.html>.