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## The stages of development in the portrayal of African-Americans in television comedy

Rashawnda Deve Horn  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

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THE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE PORTRAYAL OF  
AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN TELEVISION COMEDY

by

Rashawnda D. Horn

Bachelor of Arts  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
1994

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts**  
**In**  
**Communication Studies**

**Hank Greenspun School of Communication**  
**University of Nevada, Las Vegas**  
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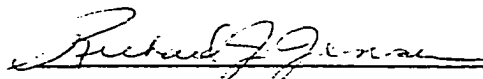
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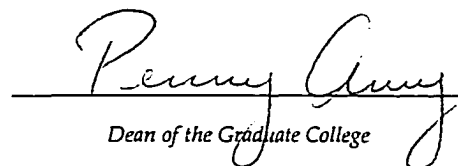
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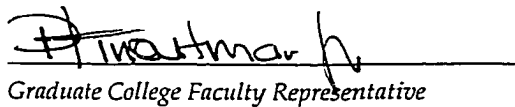
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## ABSTRACT

### **The Stages of Development in the Portrayal of African-Americans in Television Comedy**

by

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This thesis involves a historical and critical examination of the utilization and development of African Americans in television sitcoms. By reexamining the initial research by Riggs (1991) and extending it, I will introduce a new stage focusing on contemporary sitcoms

According to Riggs' (1991), study on the utilization and development of African Americans in television can be divided into four stages that represent various periods in television history . Each stage is indicated by the transition in role, increase or decline in visibility, and the changes in their image or portrayal on television. By furthering Riggs study by examining contemporary sitcoms using both a historical and critical approach I will propose a fifth stage of development in African American portrayal in television sitcoms.

To ascertain a understanding of the subject matter a historical approach to the research is applied. The historical approach will provide an overview of each stage

before introducing the fifth stage. This fifth stage is illustrated with the application of the same question posed by Riggs in the initial study.

The study provides numerous opportunities for future research into the utilization and development of African American portrayal. Future research will enhance the study and perhaps in crease overall comprehension



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The earliest uses of African-American humor emanates from slavery folklore. From the south emerged a kind of comic spirit -- the disguised plantation humor of slaves. Therefore, it is no surprise that African-Americans have made their mark in comedy. Unfortunately, most of these marks have not been in the true spirit of their comedy tradition.

Since the start of television African-Americans fought a losing battle for realistic portrayals and equal representation for their people. The 1950s, with roles as the maid and handyman, only gave way to the 1970s and the glorification of ghetto environments and unemployment as a way of life. Finally, television offered a ray of light in the 1980s by broadcasting a positive, family oriented sitcom.

This study examines the how and why that causes these very different and drastic changes in the portrayal of African-Americans. During the formative period of television, one matter of importance concerned the utilization of African-American entertainers.

The historic circumstance of post World War II America suggested equitable treatment of African-Americans and unprejudiced images. Unfortunately, this was a nation with deeply rooted racist institutions and traditions. The television industry had to consider to what degree should the industry transmit egalitarian ideals at the expense of viewer ratings and advertising revenue? Was there a place in television for black talent?

What degree should the taste of minority viewers be considered? To what extent would prejudice, especially institutionalized segregation found in the south, shape the content of network television? Should television adopt the stereotyping that flourished in radio and motion pictures? Or could the medium establish new boundaries of black expression and racial dignity? These are just a few questions posed in “Color Adjustment.”

Through a historical analysis this study will reevaluate and extend upon the ideas presented in the documentary “Color Adjustment” by Marlon T. Riggs. The documentary recounts the past 50 years of African-American actors in television by examining the use of stereotypes and negative and positive portrayal of African-Americans in television sitcoms. The documentary scrutinizes the television industry to explain the impact these stereotypes had on the utilization and progression made by African-American actors and how these stereotypes reflect on African-American society. The documentary outlines four stages in the development of African-American images. This thesis proposes that a fifth stage has developed.

The theory of a fifth stage would indicate a transition of African-American actors from one stage of development in television sitcoms to another. The transition, however negative or positive, is reflective of the television industry’s ideal way of representing African-Americans. This fifth stage is intended to shed new light on the development of African-American actors by focusing on whether stereotypic portrayals and negative images are still being utilized in the television industry, and if so, what or whom is the cause of it.

## Review of Literature

Riggs' (1991) documentary is the primary resource for the thesis. The study details the history and portrayal of African-Americans in television and examines traditional stereotypic roles that became television norms. Riggs (1991) suggests there have been four stages or transition of utilization and development for African-Americans in the history of television comedies. Stage one deals with the development of stereotypes as television norms. Stage two focuses on the cultivation of stereotyped images by African-American actors in order to maintain steady employment. Stage three encompasses the 1970s, an era defined as the self-exploitation of African-Americans in film and television. Stage four represents the 1980s and emergence of positive African-American depiction. Riggs (1991) calls this the "Cosby Era."

Fuller's (1992) study offers both positive and negative criticism of "The Cosby Show." The study provides perspective from the audience and industry representatives. Fuller (1992) indicates that for many "The Cosby Show" represents a traditional all American family, no stereotyped images, no demeaning behavior; just intelligent, well behaved children in a productive environment. According to Jackson's (1982) study of African-American families and television, the images seen on television influence peoples' thinking about race, religion, ethnic background, then basic perception of society in general. Therefore, if "The Cosby Show" represents the standard for situation comedies to be held to, individuals would have a clearer perception of individuals and society.

MacDonald's (1983) study further explains the relationship between television and African-Americans in the decades since television became popular. MacDonald illustrates the history of the African-American actor by tracing the path many have taken in order to survive in the television industry. In addition, MacDonald (1979, 1983, & 1989) offers several studies which detail the implementation of many stereotyped images that developed on popular radio shows to their crossover into television.

Although Riggs' (1991) and MacDonald's (1979, 1988) studies were found to be substantiated, Hill's (1986) study did not subscribe to the idea of the 1970s being the era of black exploitation. Hill views the 1970-1980s to be more of a positive influence to Black America than Riggs or MacDonald were willing to admit. Hill (1986) explains the longevity of stereotyped images in television as more of an individual choice by African American actors. Hill's (1986) and Ely's (1991) studies further illustrate the growth of stereotypic images African-Americans portray on television from the years of 1940 to 1980s such as the large, dark complexion, motherly figure, and how they have endured over past decades. Hill (1986) views the so-called hardship of African-American actors as more accepted, rather than forced upon them: "despite social, political, and economic obstacles minorities must accept a large measure of responsibility of their presence and influence in the media" (Hill 1986, p.28).

A view contradicting Hill's (1986) study is found in Reed's (1993) study which indicates that African-American actors selected roles not because they felt they were acceptable, but mainly due to the economic conditions at the time. Considering the number of unemployed African-Americans from the late 1950s to late 1980s, African-American actors were more likely than Caucasian actors to accept any role.

Hammer's (1992) analysis of African-American situation comedies explains that although there are more television situation comedies featuring black actors than ever before, the images they project are stereotypic and negative.

Cosby's (1994) study examines possible influences of particular television imageries about African-Americans' self-perceptions on selected young adult African-Americans. Cosby (1994) looks at two specific research questions; one being "What specific aspect of self are addressed by particular television imageries of African-Americans?" and question two being, "What possible influences do particular television imageries have on self-perception of selected young adult African-Americans"(p.7)?

Hill, Raglin & Johnson's (1990) study questions the portrayal of African-American women and the roles they have played in television. Their study outlines the development from the maid to the lawyer and also why there are such limited roles for African-American actresses in television. Hill (1990) still suggests that the development from the maid to the lawyer was accomplished by African-American actors choosing to take the role of lawyer over the role of the maid.

Churchill's (1970) study suggests a more passive approach concerning the roles taken by African-American actors. Churchill (1970) and Murray (1973) explain the use of stereotypes, urban environments as settings, and the use of black dialect by the industry to promote African-American film and television, a popular and commonplace format during the 1970s, an era perceived as highly exploitative of African Americans.

Supportive of Churchill (1970) and Murray (1973) are studies by Garland (1981), Dyson (1993), and Gray (1995). Their studies reiterate the exploiting of black entertainers in movies and television through the use of black environment to sell the

happy ghetto image and the over exaggeration of African-American dialect reinforcing common stereotypic portrayals. Garland (1981) supports certain aspects of Churchill's study in regards to the 1970s being a highly exploitative era. However, Garland (1981) suggests that it was one of self-exploitation, not one solely influenced by the industry. Ross's (1996) research offers a contrasting theory to Garland's (1981) study as it takes the standpoint of self-exploitation by actors. Ross (1996) examines African-Americans in television. His study provides a more comprehensive look at the industry and why African-American continue to take stereotypic roles.

The 1980s represent a drastic change from the exploitation of urban life racked with negative portrayals to positive family portrayals that take African-Americans out of the ghetto and into suburbia. According to Jhally's (1992) study, this perception was not fully accepted with Caucasian or African-American audiences, mainly because it introduces a portrayal of African-Americans that was not stereotypic. Studies by Jhally and Lewis (1992), Nelson and George(1995) examined the impact the series "The Cosby Show" had on the African-American and Caucasian population while attempting to determine what social significance the show made in comparison to other shows airing in the same season. The study discusses why many blacks felt "The Cosby Show" portrayed an unrealistic family image.

The 1980s opened doors for African-American actors in which they had more input creatively and comically. In Schulman's (1994) study of the rise of the standup comedy, he examines its place in the television format, and explains why the need for African-Americans to feel accepted in the television industry by white audiences no longer existed.

Farley (1993) discusses the recent heightened popularity of black stand up comedians. The article takes a critical look at one of 1990s most popular sitcoms, "Martin," and examines why the show is popular with black and white audiences. McKissack (1997) explains that although many African-American sitcoms are primarily viewed by African-American audiences, the portrayal in shows such as "Homeboys in Outer Space," "Martin," and "The Wayans Brothers," is an embarrassment to the black community. The article further illustrates that very few African-American characters are presented as urbane, educated, or successful, but the shows are watched by African-American in large numbers nonetheless.

Spigner's (1994) study explains how television and motion pictures reiterate racially stereotyped images of blacks as comic or criminal and secondary figures. African-Americans with prominent roles are eminently placed within comedy shows which are susceptible to gender stereotyping and derogatory references to lifestyles. In Samuels' (1997) interview with comedian Bill Cosby, much stated by Cosby is complimentary to the studies by Spigner (1994) and Harper (1996) because Cosby asserts that, "the news and media, motion pictures and television tend to perpetuate racism by portraying black, especially black youth, in an unrealistically negative light"(p.58).

Boyd's (1996) study explains how the portrayal of African-Americans in television programs is full of contradictions. Boyd (1996) perceives that the media highlights the negative points of black culture without emphasizing its good aspects. He further raises concern as to whether serious African-American programs are given equal opportunity to succeed before they are terminated.



The research on African Americans in television sitcoms in recent years has had limited focus. The study by Riggs (1991) as previously mentioned, examines how stereotype images, negative portrayal and self-exploitation roles affect and influence African-American portrayal in television. This thesis reexamines the utilization of African-Americans in television sitcoms while furthering the study to establish a fifth stage focusing on 1990s sitcoms.

Other material for this thesis will constitute information gathered from interviews, documentaries, literature books, journal, and magazine articles covering African-American stereotypes, past and present studies of the utilization of African-American in television and the portrayal of African-Americans in television.

### Methodology

This thesis will examine the African-American portrayal in television sitcoms beginning from the formative period of 1940s with show like “Amos ‘n’ Andy” and “Beulah” to contemporary show such as “In Living Color” and “Martin.” The research for this paper begins with an historical analysis of the documentary “The Color Adjustment” which provides the basis for this study.

Davies’ (1992) study proposes that historically and contemporary African-American were and still have severe underrepresentation, stereotypical portrayal, and are denied realistic depiction on television (p.68). The documentary “Color Adjustment” discusses the development of television’s portrayal of African-Americans and the impact on individuals and society. The documentary shows the change in television roles and portrayal in various time frames or developmental stages. These developmental stages represent the establishment of a new portrayal or image of

African Americans on television. The stages are divided into four individual stages representative of the early 1940s through the late 1980s.

The first stage constitutes the 1950s with the introduction of radio personalities to video and the carrying over of old stereotypic images into a new media.

The second stage constitutes the 1960s, and focuses on the cultivation of stereotypic images by African-American actors in order to maintain steady employment. This stage led to the development of the mammy maid, shuffle walking, and the high pitch giggles that were standard traits of the distinctive personality which for white audiences made African-American characters so funny, lovable, and controllable.

The third stage, encompasses the 1970s, an era defined as the self exploitation of African-Americans in film and television. African-American television comedies were at an all time high, credited to the producing team of Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin.

The fourth stage, or the 1980s, brought about a more socially conscious theme for African American television with programs like “Cosby Show” and “Frank’s Place” that raised social issues and reinforced family values. African- American actors were held to a higher standard by their peers.

The documentary concludes in late 1980s with the completion of the fourth stage of development. However, this thesis proposes that there is yet another stage of development in the portrayal of African American in sitcoms. The theory of a fifth stage deals with the 1990s and the return of the African-American situation comedy and the new emergence of standup comedy shows geared solely for African-American

audiences on cable television. This fifth stage will introduce three new networks which target African-American audience for their establishment.

In order to substantiate the theory of a fifth stage, contemporary sitcoms will be examined to validate a transition from stage four to another stage. This thesis will reexamine several questions posed in the "Color Adjustment." These questions include:

1. What is the new role of African-Americans in television
2. Are there accurate portrayals of African-Americans on television?
3. Does society still support or believe in the utilization of stereotyped roles?
4. Are African-Americans still willing to play stereotyped roles for monetary gain?
5. How does the current portrayal differ from those previously seen?

These questions will serve as validation of a transition to a new stage. The questions serve as a form of status marker, an indication of a change in the image of African-Americans in television. In addition the sitcoms will be examined in the same context as the documentary by focusing on the sitcoms' utilization of traditional stereotypes and portrayal of African-Americans.

For the validation of the theory of a fifth stage, the research will consist of a selection of the most popular television sitcoms that will be examined for their use of traditional stereotypes and negative portrayal of African-Americans. The examination looks for indications of their transition from stage four; identified by a positive or negative portrayal of African-American people; to another stage. A transition constitutes any change from the current stage of development. Whether that change advances to a new form of portrayal or reverts back to previously seen portrayal is inconsequential.

Any change from the present portrayal is indicative of the transition into a new stage.

Two popular sitcoms shows representative of the 1990s are “Martin” and “In Living Color.”

## CHAPTER 2

### DEVELOPMENT STAGE ONE

#### Historical Overview

After African-American men fought for their country in a newly integrated military, they returned home from World War II poised to enter a society reflecting similar changes, “when you think of the group of people whose historical experience had been transformed by the war, posed for full integration into society. Then you think about what they were greeted with as television made its debut. They were greeted with images of fully autonomous, segregated, separate black communities. Which was the community in which ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy’ thrived” (Henry Louis Gates Jr., quoted in Riggs, 1991). The struggle to end Jim Crow laws, segregation, and the portrayal of African-Americans as second class citizens enviitably took television to task.

*What is the new role of African-Americans in television?* With the introduction of television in the 1950s came the first stage in the development of African-American portrayal in television. As television phased out radio as the popular form of entertainment, African-Americans developed big expectations of having a prejudice-free era where opportunities were unlimited. It was stated that “television offered better roles for blacks than any other medium... the appearance of numerous Afro-Americans on TV was a sure sign that television is free of racial barriers” (MacDonald, 1983, p.2). African-Americans were optimistic about television for its predecessor had confirmed

them to demeaning characterizations in comedic roles with deeply embedded racist material that sprang from the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century. One of the main ways for African-Americans to appear on television came from variety shows such as the “Ed Sullivan Show” and “Steve Allen Show” where entertainers like Lena Horne and Nat King Cole were frequently seen in a positive format. One important contribution to the early demise of more positive images of African American people was the preference among Caucasian audiences for the traditional familiar stereotypes: “The mass audience, and consequently sponsors and stations, looked more approvingly on the mammies, coons, and Uncle Toms of the past than they did on blacks seeking approval through non-stereotypes talents” (MacDonald, 1983, p.22). Consequently television, much like radio, became sponsor driven, so once more African-American entertainers found themselves pigeon-holed into the minstrel-like characters of stage and radio:

The way in which television programs cover black issues are the result of deliberate policy and programming decisions about what is included or excluded, who is allowed to speak and who is not, as well as the language and imagery used. The preexisting iconography of blackness used in cinematic portraits provided an extremely convenient store-house of images which could easily transfer to nascent medium of television.

(Ross, 1996, p.88)

These characters between the early 1950s and the late 1960s became a predominate fixture on television.

Television became the greatest sociological influence of African-American people, other than their immediate environment. Not only was the search for

entertainment a factor in their lives but television was also a way for African-American people to see themselves in relation to society as a whole. Unfortunately, the new role in television for African-Americans was an extension of the role assumed in radio.

African-Americans had long been confined to demeaning characterizations, such as comedic roles with their roots deep in the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century. They were forced into roles as “pliant Uncle Toms, rascalish and indolent ‘coons,’ motherly maids, and shrewish mammies abounded in movies and broadcasting” (Murray, 1973, p.18).

According to Davie (1949) ,with radio’s utilization of such minstrel characters, African-American actors made little or no strides to change and develop the images perpetuated by white society (p.36). The fact that television was an extension of radio and many of the radio shows were converted into television programs really offered no opportunity change in the depiction of African-Americans. This evaluation placed African-American actors in an awkward position. In order to get work they had to portray the demeaning character made popular by black face actors.

*Are there accurate portrayals of African-Americans on television?* During the beginning of television African-Americans were debilitated by Jim Crow laws and considerable racist views that dominated the United States. There were very few individuals concerned with the image or portrayal of African-Americans. The accuracy of the portrayal was determined by those financing the program. Producer and writer, Hal Kanter explains,

I don’t think the sponsors or the networks and certainly not the writers ever considered the question of race relations, of stereotyping, that was the

furthest thing from our minds. Again, what we were trying to do is present a amusing set of characters in an amusing background, doing amusing things to entice that audience to come back next week.

(Riggs, 1991)

African-American actors portrayed these amusing characters in order to maintain employment in the industry: “many of the minorities are guilty of something that we had to do for survival, that’s called adjustments. We had to make adjustments in are mind constantly in order to stay away from the area of anger and the what’s wrong with me” (Diahann Carroll quoted in Riggs, 1991).

In early television the character of the black maid was highly popular. One show made popular with the utilization of this character was “Beulah” portrayed by Ethel Waters and later Louise Beavers. “‘Beulah’ was popular because she was almost idealized what every (White) person wanted in a housekeeper. They would think, God if we could only get a Beulah to run our house everything would be much better off”(Hal Kanter, Riggs, 1991). The character of “Beulah”, a portly woman with a dark complexion, was characteristic of the “mammy” figure. She was the Hollywood image of the maid:

so happy and so aware of her employer’s family and so unaware of her own. African-American women that worked as domestics in white households did so, not for a love of the job, but to support their children and give them an opportunity to do better.

(Esther Rolle quoted in Riggs, 1991)



Despite the negative image, the show proved to be a turning point for African-Americans' visibility on television because "Beulah" was the first series with a black lead.

The "Amos 'n' Andy" show first aired as a radio show in 1929 with its principle characters played by two white dialect actors, Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden. The television version featuring the first totally African-American cast proved to be highly controversial. One critic attacked the "Amos 'n' Andy Show" vociferously as a weekly reminder of "discarded and dated" minstrelsy, an oppressive form of entertainment "invented by white plantation owners to make them feel benevolent toward their picturesquely, slaphappy, indolent, craps-shooting, lovable, no account field-hands who wouldn't be able to make a living but for the white man"(MacDonald, 1983, p.29).

Eddie Anderson transformed his character of Rochester from radio personality to television character on the "Jack Benny Show". As Jack Benny's valet, confidant, and "conscience", Rochester was a strategic part of the success of the show. Although the minstrel show quality of the radio show was considerable toned down for television, Anderson's character was still a stereotype. Rochester's role, usually the only African-America on the show, was as the chauffeur and handy man for his white boss.

Ironically, Willie Best was the most prolifically employed African-American actor in early television. Best, billed as a younger version of Stepin' Fetchit, was nicknamed "Sleep 'n' Eat". Best appeared on "Trouble with Father" (1950-1955). He played Stu Erwin's brainless handyman, Willie, On "My little Margie" (1952-1955) and he was Charlie, an elevator operator. These images were more reflective of the

established minstrel and radio industries image of African-American people than of their introspective self image.

*Does society still support or believe in the utilization of stereotyped roles?*

Society did for the most part support or still believe in the stereotyped roles. “Beulah” and “Amos ‘n’ Andy” were popular shows supported by both African-American and Caucasian audiences. The NAACP and others viewed both these programs as negative portrayal of African Americans. “ ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy’ played on a familiar theme —Blacks might aspire to the American dream of success but we (African-American) were continually comically ill equip to achieve it” (Riggs, 1991). With the series’ premier on June 28, 1951, the NAACP was in the Federal Court seeking an injunction to prevent CBS from televising it. The NAACP stated that “in the minds of groups and individuals sensitive to the struggle for black civil rights, ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy’ was an affront to social achievement” (MacDonald, 1983, p.27). James Edwards, an outspoken proponent of dignified roles for African-America actors, assailed the irresponsibility of the series. Edwards contended that,

for the sake of 142 jobs which Negroes hold down with the “Amos ‘n’ Andy” show 15 million more Negroes are being pushed back 25 years by perpetuating this stereotyped on television. The money involved (and there’s a great deal) can’t hope to undo the harm the continuation of “Amos ‘n’ Andy” will effect. We don’t have to take it, not today.

(MacDonald, 1983, p.28)

In 1951 the NAACP unanimously passed a resolution at its convention after viewing the premiere of “Amos ‘n’ Andy”. This resolution was critical of the new television series

and other programs stressing negative stereotypes. In the NAACP's lawsuit against CBS the group contended that the "Amos 'n' Andy" show depicted African-Americans in a stereotypic and derogatory manner:

1. It tends to strengthen the conclusion among uniformed and prejudiced people that Negroes are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest.
2. Every character in this one and only show with an all-Negro cast is either a clown or a crook.
3. Negro lawyers are shown as slippery cowards, ignorant of their profession and without ethics.
4. Negro women are shown as cackling, screaming shrews, in bigmouth close-ups using street slang, just short of vulgarity.
5. All Negroes are shown as dodging work of any kind.
6. Millions of white Americans see this "Amos 'n' Andy" picture and think the entire race is the same.

(Andrews & Juilliard, 1991, p.62)

African-American support came primarily from the desire to have representation on television regardless whether it was positive or negative. However, there were those African-American who felt nothing wrong with the way the "Amos 'n' Andy" show depicted African-Americans. The Journal and Guide, a black weekly newspaper based in Norfolk, Virginia, surveyed sixteen viewers and discovered "that eleven enjoyed the new incarnation of "Amos 'n' Andy" (Ely, 1991, p.7). Additionally, "one black critic even faulted the new series with its all-black cast for failing to match the quality of the old radio show or the 'Amos 'n' Andy' movie of 1930 in which Gosden and Correll had

performed in black face makeup”(Ely, 1991, p.7). Many argued that the program was simply comedic caricature, no more offensive to blacks than “The Goldbergs” was to Jewish people or “Life with Luigi” was to Italians. Supporters contended that “the writing was humorous, the acting was solid the popularity of the show was commercially impressive”(MacDonald, 1983, p.29). The actors of the series defended the “Amos ‘n’ Andy” show and attacked African-American activists in the NAACP for being “ill-informed people of our own race who have irresponsibly threatened a boycott of our sponsor and have unfairly characterized the show, its producer and ourselves” (Hill, 1986, p.31)). With African-American actors justifying the portrayal as realistic or not warranting a backlash from protesters, it is understandable why these images remained a constant in television.

*Are African-Americans still willing to play stereotyped roles for monetary gain?*

As a way to obtain steady employment, talented black actors like Mantan Moreland, Lincoln Perry (Stepin Fetchit), Lillian Randolph, and Eddie (Rochester) Anderson adopted distorted racial characteristics: “They cultivated stereotyped Negro accents. They learned to walk with a shuffle, to pop and roll their eyeballs, and to emit high-pitched giggles” (Ross, 1996, p.12). Essentially, African-American actors accepted any role that was available to them. During the period it is important to look at what type of roles African-American actors were allowed to play: “Asking a actor to accept only roles that fit his definition of black reality. We would be saying he should rile against his own livelihood” (Murray, 1973, p.22). The “Amos ‘n’ Andy” Show was written, produced and directed by Caucasian men. The series was a stereotyped projection of black life. Defenders were correct in noting that the series meant success for many black actors:

“Some felt that as the first long running network program utilizing dozens of blacks, it might be the beginning of prosperity for blacks in TV” (Riggs, 1991). An influential black newspaper, the Pittsburgh Courier, supported the series. According to that journal, “it provides for the first time lucrative and continuous employment for many talented troupers who have waited a long time for this kind of an open-door opportunity into the great and rapidly expanding television industry” (MacDonald, 1983, p.29).

*How does the current portrayal differ from those previously seen?* The previous portrayal was one of racist images that supported most stereotypes created by slavery and life on the plantation. With the initial stage of development, many of the television programs were adaptations of radio shows that sponsors felt would help launch television as the new popular medium. Prior to television, African-American actors got little or no work in radio. They were placed in the minstrel show where much of the negative image and stereotypes originated. Watkins (1994) explains, “The minstrelsy did establish a set of derogatory racial stereotypes in American humor. These not only became standard element in popular stage humor (and later, radio, film, and television humor) but also common referents in the everyday humor of nearly all Americans -blacks included” (p.129). Further, “minstrelsy had established a fraudulent image of Negro behavior (in both the serious and the comic vein) to which all African-Americans were forced to respond” (Watkins, 1994, p.103). African-Americans saw radio as a mass media that rarely utilized them because African-American characters on radio were portrayed by Caucasian dialect actors. The only African-American to appear as special guest on radio shows were those with some sort of celebrity status as a performer. Basically, the previous portrayal on radio were misleading to audiences. An image was painted of

African-Americans dialect, behavior, intelligence, and way of life under racist pretexts. Therefore, as African-American were actual given the opportunity to represent themselves on television was the first transition in the development of African-American portrayal.

### Interpretive Analysis

Television opened it doors to a select few that were willing to portray the minstrel image. Black men were successful in stereotypic characterizations: “Anderson’s naturally hoarse voice gave him a vocal quality akin to the throaty ‘coon’ dialect developed by minstrel endmen” (Hill, 1986, p.69). The character of Rochester did nothing to advance the cause of the realistic portrayal of African-Americans. Eddie Anderson served as a reinforcement to every stereotype. However, Willie Best proved to be a even more volatile image than Eddie Anderson. Best “could pop his eyeballs when nervous, speak classic pidgin English, and shake his lanky body at the thought of entering a graveyard” (Hill, 1986, p.69). Willie Best’s minstrel character presented a demeaning image of African-Americans helping to reinforce negative stereotypes as false reality.

There was one show that stood out in the history of African-American portrayal on television. If any strides for equality had been accomplished, the “Amos ‘n’ Andy” show quickly destroyed them. In 1951, the airing of “Amos ‘n’ Andy” struck a blow to African-Americans that would last for decades. If one show typified the image of African-Americans in the first stage of development it would definitely be the “Amos ‘n’ Andy” show. The “Amos ‘n’ Andy” show capitalized on the migration of thousands of African-Americans from rural southern towns to northern cities after World War I. The theme of every episode was the attempt of the rural bumpkins to come to terms with life

in the big city. The show was the epitome of classic minstrel show images and portrayal. Amos Jones (played by Alvin Childress) was “a low key, compliant Uncle Tom. He and his wife Ruby were an unhumorous twosome trying to bring reason and level-headedness to bear upon their rascalish Harlem friends” (MacDonald, 1983, p.27). Andrew Hogg Brown simply known as Andy (played by Spencer Williams Jr.) represented “an easy going dim wit who always had an eye for a pretty girl and never ceased to be duped by his supposed friends” (MacDonald, 1983, p.27). George “Kingfish” Stevens (portrayed by Tim Moore) represented the show’s stereotyped scheming “coon” character whose chicanery left his friends distrustful and the audience in laughter. To complete the stereotypic framework were of the show, Kingfish’s shrewish wife, Sapphire Stevens (portrayed by Ernestine Wade) and the domineering mother-in-law, Mama (Amanda Randolph); a feeble-minded janitor, Lightnin’ (Horace “Nicodemus” Stewart); and a thoroughly disreputable lawyer, Algonquin J. Calhoun (Johnny Lee). The “Amos ‘n’ Andy” show represented a thorough mix of every minstrel character to completely create a false image of African-Americans.

The “Amos ‘n’ Andy” show perpetuated many myths created in minstrel shows. Written, produced, and directed by white men, the series was a stereotyped projection of African-American life: “Certainly characters were exaggerated for purposes of comedy but their essence was drawn directly from offensive minstrel shows, an entertainment form that was anachronistic in the 1950’s” (Gates quoted in Riggs, 1991). The legacy of burnt cork comedy routines were inherent in the series’ characters: “neither Andy, Kingfish, nor Sapphire could utter a sentence without using incorrect grammar, malapropos, or mispronunciations to illustrate their basic ignorance. Thus ultimatum

became 'ultomato,' secretary was pronounced 'sekatary,' legitimate became 'layjiterat,' and kingfish's moaning 'holy mackerel,' was always exclaimed as "holy mack'l" (MacDonald, 1983, p.33). The show offered no positive or realistic presentation of African-American society. "Amos n' Andy perpetuated the myth of the black matriarch. This was manifest in the image of shrewish women continually brow beating their men. There was no male chauvinism or sexual equality. The series projected dominating black women and socially weak black men" (MacDonald, 1983, p.32). The show had no representative of a balanced relationship where no one person held the upper-hand. Even with Kingfish as a shiftless loafer, Sapphires' constant shrill criticism was nonetheless debilitating. When Sapphire was assisted in her attack by Mama, the verbal assault was devastating, as illustrated in a dinner table conversation between Kingfish, Mama, and Sapphire a scene from the television show:

Kingfish: Have some more peas, mother-in-law dear?

Mama: When I want some, I'll help myself.

Kingfish: Oh, well I just...

Mama: Why, I got along all these years without you telling me what  
to eat.

Kingfish: Well, if you don't wan'em, don't take'em. That's all right  
with me.

Mama: Ah you're begrudging me the food. Well, I eat little enough  
without you complaining all the time.

Kingfish: Now listen, Mama, can't we just...

Mama: You mind your own business, I'm talkin' to my daughter.



Sapphire: George, stop pickin' on Mama!

(MacDonald, 1983, p.33)

After such a confrontation the Kingfish was constantly shown being ejected from his own home by his victorious wife: "In the climate that made 'Amos 'n' Andy' popular for so long it was considered hilarious to see a bumbling middle-aged black schemer being kicked out of his home by a haranguing black woman"(MacDonald, 1983, p.33). The "Amos n' Andy" show offered African-Americans no role models to look to for inspiration. The central characters of the show had no jobs:

The Kingfish and Andy were always unemployed, and women in the series were unsalaried housewives. Amos who appeared only fleetingly in the programs, drove a taxi cab. Lightnin' was a janitor. The only professional in the regular cast was Calhoun. But he was a nefarious lawyer whose lack of professional ethics was outweighed only by his misuse of the languages.

(Ely, 1991, p.22)

Calhoun was seen as an incompetent buffoon with corrupted values. There were few social aspirations in the series. Amos and Lightnin' were content with their careers. The show did little by way of showing the reality of African-American society at the time. Although there was unemployment during era of the show, there was no example of welfare dependence and no hunger. This depiction painted a reality that African-Americans did not want or need for anything. They were content in their existence, "unemployment was seen as a product of personal laziness, not the result of discrimination, segregation, or inferior education" (MacDonald, 1983, p.33). Because

there were no other TV series offering positive role models for blacks viewers, the disservice done by this popular program is apparent.

The institutionalized racism of the radio industry was now making a place in the television industry. The development of stage two is reflective of the standardizing and cultivation of radio images of African-Americans into the television industry.

## CHAPTER 3

### DEVELOPMENT STAGE TWO

#### Historical Overview

According to Riggs (1991), the development of stage two was identified as television's cultivation of the stereotypic images established in radio with African-American actors.

*What is the new role of African-Americans in television?* During the 1950s and early 1960s television took its place as America's most popular form of entertainment as African-Americans struggled for a place in the television industry. As they strove to change the negative image created by radio, the impact they had on television proved to be as harmful. Media historian MacDonald (1983) states:

Television had the potential to reverse centuries of unjust ridicule and misinformation. In terms of utilization of black professional talent, and in the portrayal of Afro-American characters, TV as a new medium had the capability of ensuring a fair and equitable future. (p. xv)

Instead of changing negative portrayals and stereotypes established in radio, television reinforced and cultivated them. Riggs' (1991) suggests that the time between 1950-1960 was crucial in the development of stage two for African-Americans.

*Are there accurate portrayals of African-Americans on television?* It was believed that television held the prospect of a bright and appealing future for

African-Americans. Television was envisioned as an irresistible theater for mass diversion.

However, cultural critic, Nick Stewart states, “comedy about black people is designed for us to hate ourselves and for others to hate us. Just about every time we as blacks laugh at blacks doing comedy on television, we’re hating ourselves. Most of the time those actors are doing something we should hate. Laughing at black comedy is like eating rat poison and not realizing it is killing us” (Andrews & Juilliard, 1986, p.86).

As television struggles to find its audience, many African-American actors became casualties, Producer and writer, Hal Kanter explains;

I don’t think the sponsor or the network and certainly not the writers ever considered the questions of race relations of, stereotyping, that was furthest from our mind. Again what we were trying to do is present a amusing set of characters in an amusing a background, doing amusing things to entice that audience to come back the next week.

(Hal Kanter quoted in Riggs, 1991)

*Does society still support or believe in the utilization of stereotyped roles?* In 1950-1951 on Tuesday nights “the Beulah Show” was the sitcom to watch, just as Americans had listened to the radio version five years earlier. The television industry and society developed a way of showing its support and approval for its favorite program by giving them awards. Ethel Waters become the first African-American actress to be nominated for an Emmy award, television’s top honor. The NAACP and other opposing groups stressed that “Greater visibility on television was only one objective of the civil rights groups; equally important was the quality of roles assigned to black actors. The stereotypes presented on ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy’ and ‘Beulah’ were verboten. ... if there were

going to be black maids and porters, then there would have to be black secretaries and lawyers”(Andrews & Juilliard, 1986, p.116). It was easier to get networks and production companies to use African-American performers than to use them in positive roles. The late African-American actor Godfrey Cambridge recalled an incident in 1964 that illustrates the plight of African-American artist during the era:

I was called to a TV station to play the part of a slave. My mother was being played by a white actress, which I didn't mind because I do a lot of different voices and accents myself. While we were rehearsing I mentioned that to the director, and I did some of my voices for him. He said he liked them but later he said, ' we'll call you if we have any strictly Negro parts.' What he meant was that he would call me if he had parts for me as a slave, or mess sergeant or porter, or anything like that, he wouldn't think of me as a doctor, a lawyer, or anything dignified. And you know what? This was a show about discrimination.

(Andrews & Juilliard, 1986, p.117)

*Are African-Americans still willing to play stereotyped roles for monetary gain?*

African-American actors had limited roles available to them. “Buelah” was the first series with a black lead. It debuted on October 3, 1950, on the ABC television network. This series was a landmark: “the first to star a black actress, but as had been the usual fate of blacks in motion pictures and radio, it featured the stereotypical mammies, Uncle Toms, and coons... what little dignity Waters then Louise Beavers brought to the role was diminished by the repetition of such catch phrases as ‘Love dat man,’ ‘somebody bawlfo’ Beulah?’ and ‘on the con-positively-trairy’(Andrews & Juilliard, 1986, p.66)! With so

many African-American accepting roles with negative images and stereotypes, it would appeared they did not mind the depiction.

*How does the current portrayal differ from those previously seen?* In stage two there was no change in the portrayal of African-Americans in television. It was a time when those few African-Americans working in the industry cultivated the negative images established in radio. Stage two in the development of African-American portrayal in television was a tale of persistent stereotyping, reluctance to develop or star black talent, and exclusion of minorities from the production side of the industry.

### Interpretive Analysis

With the cultivation of stereotypic images established in radio, two of television's most popular sitcoms were created. The "Amos 'n' Andy Show" and "The Beulah Show" were the first to star African-American actors. An in-depth study of several Amos n Andy shows confirms that without the abominable butchering of the English language perpetuated by the Kingfish, Andy, and Calhoun, the show was less then humorous. The following is a brief exchange of dialogue from the series pilot episode, "The Rare Coin". None of the bombastic phrasing or dialect for which the series became know remains:

Kingfish: Excuse me, Andy, can't you see that I'm busy taking a blood count? One two, three, add four, subtract two. That's the most anemic blood I've ever seen.

Andy: Kingfish, you mean to say you're an actual doctor?

Kingfish: Well, I haven't told anyone, but I've been taking a correspondence course in doctoring from that big medical school in Baltimore - John Mansville.

Andy: Yeah, I've heard about that place.

(Andrews & Juilliard, 1986, p.86)

The "Amos 'n' Andy" show was accused of not only butchering the English language, but also of depicting incidents and characters in a demeaning manner, of stereotyping an entire race of people. In a analysis of the 1952 episode titled "The Broken Clock," there were numerous scenes considered offensive to African-Americans. The premise was typical sitcom material and could have worked on other comedies of the decade. But in fact, there were far from subtle undertones that made "Amos 'n' Andy" unlike any other sitcom on television.

The episode commences with the Kingfish being honored by his lodge brothers at a testimonial dinner to celebrate twenty years of service to the Mystic Knights of the Sea. Lawyer Calhoun is the toastmaster about to present Kingfish with a clock as a token of the members' esteem. The lodge hall is appropriately decorated and seated around a banquet table are the brothers, which include Lightnin', dressed in a business suit. As Calhoun rises out of his seat to make a unenthusiastic speech, it is obvious that his presentation will be all buffoonery. The fact that Calhoun is a lawyer, a professional man is all but ignored. This perpetuates the belief that African-Americans can not be taken serious in position outside of domestic or manual labor.

Calhoun began his postulating, then suddenly terminates it when he realizes that the words are part of a eulogy once delivery over the body of departed lodge brother. He fumbling for a second scrape of paper from his coat pocket, but it turns out to be part of a stag party monologue. Finally, with no written speech to rely on he says, "he will speak from the heart"(Connelly, Mesher, & Ross, 1952) as he launches in to a painfully honest description of Kingfish. The speech takes on the air of a sermon with Calhoun's delivery

reminiscent of a stereotypical black preacher who is threatening his congregation with hellfire and brimstone. These images raise questions to the Amos 'n' Andy series. Were Calhoun's preachy overtones an affront to religious African-Americans? Or more importantly was the fact that Calhoun was an attorney, a profession that African-Americans have had to work harder than others to succeed, more insulting to struggling African-Americans who believed the profession demands respect?

In the following scene Kingfish shows the clock to Sapphire and her mother. He boast that his lodge brothers honored him, whereas the only two women in his life ridicule and insult him. Trying to ignore them, he plugs in the clock only to find that it is broken. Mama exclaims that, "That's two things around here that don't work!" (Connelly, Mosher, & Ross, 1952)

Mothers-in-law have been the long suffering targets of jibes by comedians. The antagonism between the Kingfish and Mama was no different. Was it because Mama had no respect for the man in whose household she sometimes resided? Was this lack of respect coupled with the perpetuating myth that African-Americans have a matriarchal society?

In the next scene, Kingfish watches as Andy tries to repair the clock. Andy's cigar is perched in the corner of his mouth, his jacket is off, and his shirt sleeves are rolled up, almost denoting that he knows what he is doing. The Kingfish is obviously pleased, until Andy acknowledges, "There were too many little wheels inside the clock" (Connelly, Mosher, & Ross, 1952). The camera pulls back to reveal the clock's parts spread across the desk. Was Andy's ignorance amusing to the average African-American who knew that the repair of timepieces should be left to experts?



The Kingfish decides to register a complaint with the gift shop where the clock was purchased. After getting the run around he tries to take advantage of the warranty and goes directly to the manufacture in hope of exchanging the clock. He further suggest that Lightnin’’ drive Andy and him in Lightnin’s car.

There is nothing really unusual about the above scene, except that Lightnin’, the show’s classic Stepin Fetchit character, owns his own car. And a stylish convertible, at that. Is this typical of a character who has been characterized in previous shows as lazy, inept, and maybe even slightly retarded? Can this inconsistency be attributed to the writers who had little regard for logic or continuity? It borders on the bizarre that neither the Kingfish nor Andy had an automobile, yet the lowly janitor did.

As the scene continues Andy and the Kingfish are mistake by the Caucasian foreman as government expert sent to test a top-secret altimeter. After an exchange of dialogue, the foreman dresses Andy and the Kingfish in Eskimo type parkas so the clock can be tested at a temperature of sixty degrees below zero. The Kingfish makes a remark about how difficult it is to get a company to live up to its lifetime guarantee, but he and Andy follow instructions and remain in the freezer with no questions asked for almost a half hour.

After this ordeal, the two men leave with the valuable altimeter, thinking it is the replacement clock. How can it be that two adult men who obviously know to tell time are not able to differentiate between the two instruments? Is this an honest mistake that the average white American could make or does it go beyond that to become a slur on the ignorance of African-Americans?

When Andy and the Kingfish throw the worthless “clock” in the trash the following day, Lightnin’’ retrieves it , thinking it is a speedometer. Were the writers

aware of the inconsistency? Lightnin' the one out of the three that owns a car, mistakes a clock for a speedometer. Aside from the fact that he drove Andy and the Kingfish to the manufacture building to exchange the clock.

In the next scene, two government men approach the janitor outside the lodge hall and inquire as to the whereabouts of Andy and the Kingfish. Lightnin' immediately falls in to his "dumb coon" status and directs them inside. It is interesting to note that one of the government agents, presumably with the FBI, is black. Tall, well dressed, and fair-skinned, he could be mistaken for a white man. His race was confirmed the moment the Caucasian agent ordered him to check the trash cans for the missing altimeter.

When lawyer Calhoun arrives, a relieved Kingfish asks that he help them out of the mess. Calhoun doesn't hesitate in giving a theatrical character reference, but remembers moments later to ask what charge has been brought against his two clients. The agents tell him it is "espionage" whereupon Calhoun counters with "these two fellows ain't never started a fire in their life!" Here again, a lawyer who doesn't know the difference between arson and espionage? Calhoun adds insult to injury when he walks out on his friends in desperation. There is no loyalty nor sense of friendship displayed.

Now at the agents' mercy, Kingfish loses all sense of propriety and begs not to be arrested. He explains that he doesn't want Sapphire and his mother-in-law to find out about his latest predicament. The agents react quickly, assuming the two women are accomplices to the crime.

The next scene shows everyone being arrested. Mama take full advantage of the situation to belittle the Kingfish, even threatening bodily harm. Mama's attire is typically flamboyant and tasteless, another misleading cliché: "Mama's taste in clothing was reflective of a long-standing myth about black women who put on a 'flashy front.' Mama

wore a ratty fur wrap, no matter what season, and plopped hats on her head like ersatz crowns.”(Andrews & Juilliard, 1986, p.94). Was this the writer’s way of showing Mama’s need for upward mobility, or was it part of the race’s alleged ignorance of tastefulness?

In the final scene, “Amos saves the day when he innocently ask Lightnin’ for a ride and finds the altimeter in the car. Amos, the compliant Uncle Tom persona, who always intervenes and saves his ignorant buddies from pending disaster”(Connelly, Mosher, & Ross, 1952).

In another episode, “Sapphire Disappears” the show commences with Amos and Andy rushing to the Mystic Knights of the Sea Hall after receiving an urgent call from the Kingfish. The two enter the hall and find a distraught Kingfish pacing the floor. The Kingfish explains that Sapphire disappeared two days ago. All of her clothes were there, she had a roast in the oven, the table was set. Although she has left him before she would always leave a note stating where she was. With Kingfish’s mind running wild, he comes to the conclusion that Sapphire has been a victim of foul play. Amos makes a call to the house to see if Sapphire is with her mother. The three listen for Mama to answer the phone. Without saying a word Mama picks up the phone waits for a moment then hangs up. Kingfish, now more convinced then ever, fears the murderer of Sapphire has also gotten Mama. Amos, being the voice of reason, suggests they call the police. Kingfish decides that he and Andy should go to Mama’s house in Brooklyn to investigate the murder instead.

The next scene shows Mama at her home in Brooklyn, hanging up the phone. Sapphire apprehensively asks if she should talk to George. Mama, in a very stern voice, orders sapphire not to call. Asserting “not on your life this is the only way to bring the

bum to his senses. You're gonna stay away until he makes up his mind to support you and gets a job"(Connelly, Mosher, & Ross, 1952). A typical argument on the show between Mama, Sapphire, and Kingfish was over his employment status. The implication by the shows writers insinuate that Kingfish is unemployed by choice not because of African-American social status at this time when vast numbers of African-Americans were unemployed. The interference by Mama, once more the portrays the image of the dominate black women and the socially weak black man.

As the scene continues, Mama tells Sapphire that they will go to Florida to stay with her sister. As Sapphire finishes packing Mama tells Sapphire to leave anything that Kingfish has bought her behind and to insure her orders are obeyed, Mama takes the dress and hat to burn them in the incinerator. Mama heads down stairs to wait for Mr. Davis, a police lieutenant with the burglary detail, and potential renter of the house while they are away.

The next scene picks up back in the hall. An upset Kingfish tell Amos and Andy that he feels something is going on at Mama's house in Brooklyn. Amos, being the usual voice of reason, tells Kingfish he should go to the police. Kingfish decides that he and Andy are going to Brooklyn themselves to investigate.

In the next scene Kingfish and Andy are on their way to Brooklyn. When they arrive, Kingfish find the house unusually dark. Kingfish and Andy decide to go around to the back of the house to see if they can get in. Andy notices a window open, suggesting they try a routine he saw in the circus to boost kingfish up through the window, the "ally oop". After several failed attempts based on Andy conclusion that Kingfish wasn't "oooping" when he was "allying", Kingfish suggests that he stand on Andy's shoulders. As Andy lifts kingfish on his shoulders, he is still unable to reach the window. So Andy spots

some boxes on the opposite side of the yard and walks away to get one leaving Kingfish to fall to the ground. Andy returns with the box, asking Kingfish why didn't he wait until he got the box. Kingfish says "why didn't I wait? You big dummy you can't leave me just hanging up there in gravity." Andy reply's "I'm sorry kingfish I didn't know" (Connelly, Mosher, & Ross, 1952). This scene play to the portrayal of the ignorant blacks, individuals who can not understand simple common sense aspects of gravity. Therefore Kingfish suggests that they do it scientifically by stacking the boxes so they can climb up to the window. This was a novel idea, but Kingfish's placement of the boxes was hardly scientific. The instability of the structure once again demonstrated ignorance of common sense aspects. Would the average white person have built a structure with small supporting big. However, Andy climbs the collapsing structure and enters the house followed by Kingfish. Once in the house they find several item in Mama's old room that further confuses them like a man's robe, socks, and cigars. As they attempt to explains why male clothing was in mama's room Mr. Davis comes home. To avoid Mr. Davis, the suspected murderer, Andy and Kingfish make a quick escape jumping out of the bathroom window.

In the next scene back at the Hall Kingfish is bending over to stretch his back when Andy enters the room. Inquiring on Kingfish's condition, he replies "when I fell out the window over there (Mama's House) my sacro-cracker jack must have popped out of place like a bed spring" (Connelly, Mosher, & Ross, 1952). This scene illustrates of the writers butchering of the English language in the name of comedy. Kingfish, still unsure of the strange man presents in Mama's house, sends Lightnin' to Brooklyn to do more investigating.

The next scene shows Lightnin' in the backyard of mama's house searching for clues. In his own inept way, while search for clues he falls into a trash can and gets stuck. After several minutes of wrestling with the trash can, he breaks free and finds Sapphires' burnt dress and hat. Lightnin' quickly makes his way back to the hall. Finally convinced of foul play Kingfish has Calhoun and Lightnin' go to the police station.

The scene begins with Calhoun and Lightnin' entering the homicide office. Calhoun postures and clears his throat repeatedly to gain the officer's attention. The African-American officer filing records at the time turns asking Calhoun what he wants. Calhoun stammering for words stumbles over several incomplete sentences. He finally forgets why he came to the Homicide bureau and turns to Lightnin' for guidance. Calhoun demands justice for his client in his sermon like speech. As the officers get a closer look at Calhoun he removes his file from the cabinet and buzzes for an officer. Calhoun still in mid sermon his taken away by two officers. The portrayal of Calhoun as a non-articulate lawyer is demonstrated repeatedly. However, more importantly Calhoun is wanted by the police for a matter obviously related to a homicide. Once more the image of African-Americans in professional positions is laughed at.

In the final scene Kingfish explains what has happened to Amos who once more suggests that they go to the police. But Kingfish fears it's too late, Sapphire and Mama have been killed by Mr. Davis. Only now after her presumed death he realizes that he loved his wife, hopes that she is in heaven and will someday contact him. Just then the phone rang, it was Sapphire calling to finally tell George (Kingfish) where she was;

Sapphire: It me George Sapphire.

Kingfish: where is you? Where is you?

Sapphire: why I down here George.

Kingfish envisions down here as hell and passes out on the floor. With the final scene was Kingfish's thought that Sapphire would someday contact him a play on the image of African-Americans being superstitious. And was the Kingfish hopes that Sapphire had made it to heaven only to have hopes let down by the misleading phone call reflective of the racist idea that there was no place for blacks in heaven or only the good, compliant, and virtuous blacks would go to heaven.

As Riggs (1991) points out, "Amos 'n' Andy" were an important part of the cultivation of stereotype and the negative portrayal of African-Americans in television. By portraying the negative image established in radio, "Amos 'n' Andy" validate the stereotypes, helping to justify their continued utilization. With the cultivation of stereotypic portrayal of African-Americans in television the demise of these very images was impossible. The network began to count on them for a successful program. As the civil rights movement took precedence in the media, networks supporting the cause attempted to gear television shows to more of the African-American point of view, their way of life in hopes of capturing the "Black experience" for the all of America to see. As creative control extended to included a few African-American entertainers, allowing them to not only star in, but creating the images society would see. These newly developed images prove the transition into stage three with the portrayal of African-American images on television.

## CHAPTER 4

### DEVELOPMENT STAGE THREE

#### Historical Overview

The third stage of development and portrayal of African-Americans focuses on the “Black experience,” the reality of African-American life and the “glorification of the ghetto” as depicted on television. The third stage encompasses the 1970s which was characteristic of the exploitation of African-Americans in the film and television industry. This exploitation was both self-induced by African-American comedians and administered by the creative team of Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin.

*What is the new role of African-Americans in television?* Television’s portrayal of African-Americans evolved into something new for reasons that were political, economic and social. They reflected the popular attitudes and natural directions that arose in the 1970s. Riggs presents this stage as an unusual synthesis of historical and contemporary influences. The portrayal of African-Americans in television reflects the social and political view point during the time.

With Richard M. Nixon elected as President and his appeal to “the silent majority” and for “law and order” the moderating influence on the reformist determination seen through Roosevelt to Kennedy to the Johnson administration came to a halt. To Nixon and his administrators:

Inner-city riots were acts of insurrection to be met with increased power.



Marching antiwar protesters were reminiscent of the anarchistic mobs whose hostile demonstrations precipitated the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917. Dissidence was considered disruptive, activism was disloyal and the new administration blamed television for social disorder that marked the United States.

(MacDonald, 1983, p.151)

Vice-president Spiro T. Agnew saw much of the racial violence in the United States as the result of:

networks glorification of “embittered” black radicals .. Agnew railed against newsmen who elevated Stokely Carmichael “from obscurity to national prominence” instead of recognizing such anger as an expression of black frustration and social impotence, the vice president assailed television... for preferring “irrational radical” over “rational moderates.”

(MacDonald, 1983, p.152)

The debate over television and its relationship to social turmoil in the United States had a particularly chilling effect in the role of African-Americans in the medium. The “relevancy—social and political reality brought into a TV story line....in the new era it was a liability. Real life drama, with or without black characters, died a quick death in the ratings, as the American public demonstrated a distaste for issues-oriented entertainment” (Churchill, 1970, p.48). Just as the death of relevancy helped ensure the stifling of series or stories treating serious issues affecting African-Americans, the practical disappearance of the news documentary in the early 1970s further helped to isolate blacks from meaningful television exposure. As a result of the isolation, African-Americans digressed back to old forms of access to television via situation comedies.

African-American actors and comedians were in a mind set of achieving what was long overdue. The creation of a “new” brand of comedy they called their own provided to be more volatile than those prior.

*Are there accurate portrayals of African-Americans on television?* The African-American presence in television was still questionable. They remained visible, but usually in stereotyped and subordinate roles. The 1970s African-American actor achieved greater ratings and popularity than earlier actors. Something however was still missing:

The quality African-American performer has been debased black sensibilities have been ignored. Concern with minority social problems have been largely absent from entertainment and nonfiction shows. While blacks have been consistently used in comedies, serious characterization in detective, western, science fiction, romance, dramatic anthology, and serialized drama, programming has been limited and predictable.

(MacDonald, 1983, p.150)

As television abandoned relevancy and its coexistence themes, there were noticeable shifts in programs involving African-Americans: “Dramatic series featuring solid black characters vanished. The mature comedic series which typified the late 1960s now gave way to bolder situation comedies purposing to be racial satires but actually reviving chronic racist stereotypes” (MacDonald, 1983, p.159).

*Does society still support or believe in the utilization of stereotyped roles?* By the end of 1970s relevancy, black actors and social issues virtually disappeared from television, “as the nation slipped easily into the mood of self-delusion, encouraged by

the politics of the time, soul searching disappeared from network video. Tired of demonstrations and confrontation, viewers preferred seeing, 'the good things' about America. Ratings figures told the network that most citizens wanted escape instead of education, support in place of questioning" (MacDonald, 1983, p.161). This new sentiment from the network was predictable considering the pressure placed on them by the Nixon administration to rid the airwaves with images that depicted the United States as anything other than a contented society.

Yet, African-American society was deeply submerged in the civil right movement and fighting for what it felt was long overdue. This sentiment was strongly felt pertaining to their portrayal in television over the last two decades. African-Americans wanted control over their image on television and their rights as human beings in society. However, the new depiction they wished society to see as reality was equated to the images and portrayal cultivated from the late 1950s - to mid 1960s.

*Are African-Americans still willing to play stereotyped roles for monetary gain?*

The replacement of the traditionally stereotyped images of the late 1940s and 1950s with the assimilated character of "Julia" had proven to African-American viewers that the television industry was capable of depicting them in non-stereotypic images. African-American were still waiting to see themselves depicted in their own communities, in roles that did not demand assimilation.

In the fall of 1970 there were nineteen prime-time network series employing African-Americans in prominent roles. There were several series from the previous decade including "Julia", "Mission: Impossible", "Rowan and Martin's Laugh in," "the Bill Cosby Show," "the Mod Squad," "Room 222," "Ironside," "Mannix," and "the Lawrence Welk Show." New shows with African-Americans in reoccurring supporting

roles were “the Store Front Lawyers” (Royce Wallace), “the Mary Tyler Moore Show” (John Amos), and “Make Room for Granddaddy” (Roosevelt Grier). Those series featuring blacks inclusive of “Julia” and “the Bill Cosby Show” were canceled by fall 1971” (MacDonald, 1983, p.160).

Of remaining ten prime-time series with African-Americans only three were new series. The three surviving shows were “The Funny Side,” “Partners,” and “All in the Family,” all comedies indicative of the future direction for African-Americans in television. African-Americans would now reinvent comedy in the likeness of tradition stereotypes and portrayal claiming their comedic images to now be the African-Americans “reality”. The “Flip Wilson Show” was heavily criticized for this style of humor: “While supporters argued that ‘his humor was drawn from black culture. Unlike earlier prejudicial series, it felt his brand of comedy was not the product of whites interpreting the ‘black experience’ in minstrelsy types”(MacDonald, 1983, p.174). That Wilson was called “authentic” seemed reminiscent of the Africa-American performers on the minstrelsy show circuit who were also billed as “authentic” Negroes. Although the images African-American actors and comedians were now claiming more accurate reflections of “reality” or “authentic” images they were still based on the traditional stereotypes of early television.

*How does the current portrayal differ from those previously seen?* Shows like the “Amos ‘n’ Andy Show,” and “Beulah” were created with the purpose of entertaining white America. During the mid 1960s as the civil right movement shifted into full speed, television shows such as “Julia” and “the Bill Cosby Show” were created to pacify a nation at odds with itself. Julia was the first African-American

family series since “Amos ‘n’ Andy.” The airing of “Julia” was a crucial period in the portrayal of African-Americans in society:

It was a turning point to mobilize and get the sympathy of whites who deep resistance to essentially, black enfranchisement into society. The spill over that it had was to a least raise the question of absence of black representation on television or at lest to raise the question to what extend did television have some responsibility to try and participate in this opening up of society.

(Herman Gray quoted in Riggs, 1991)

Julia indicated that “Black people did not all live in the ghetto; that they could have fewer than five children in a household; that they could speak impeccable English; could wear attractive clothes without being a prostitute or royalty; they could have dilemmas that had nothing to do with white folks”(Cummings, 1985, p.78). The 1970s African-American actor still desired positive roles, dealing with issues of relevancy outside of the sitcom genre while comedic actors concentrated on developing roles that allowed them to express humor from the African-American point of view. The aftermath produced a far better portrayal than that cultivated year earlier.

The new African-American television actors were “self-depreciating, continually joking about being black, and bring to bear on themselves many of the stereotyped prejudices long considered racist” (Garland, 1981, p.15). The 1970s were described by Sociologist and cultural critic, Hermon Gray, as the self-exploitation of African-American by capitalizing on the reality of the “Black experience” which is life in the inner-city and the “glorification of the ghetto” image in film and television.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., denounced such shows as “the Flip Wilson Show,” “Good

Times,” “Sanford and Son,” and “What’s Happening!” “These shows represented the hell holes of the ghetto as places people could survive in they made the ghetto palatable to American society as 1960s political movement like the “War on Poverty” and the “Great Society” were ending. Giving the image that blacks are happy there, they can thrive, they have good times”(Henry Louis Gates quoted in Riggs, 1991).

### Interpretive Analysis

The first successful series to air after the cancellation of “Amos ‘n’ Andy” was “Julia.” The show’s creator and producer Hal Kanter explains, “ I felt I owed a lot of my black colleges some sort of an apology for a lot of the things we had done on ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy’” (Hal Kanter quoted in Riggs, 1991). The airing of “Julia” in 1968 as the civil rights movement became a national crisis in the media, had a profound impact in African-American society, “the show was a significant change in black characterization on television at that time, because it was the first sitcom to feature a black in a starring role that was not a domestic”(Hill, 1986, p.44). At a time when the nation was in a state of unrest, where daily new programs aired protest marches and police brutality, “Julia” instead focuses on the day to day life of a professional, single-parent living in a integrated world. Julia’s husband had been an officer in the armed forces and had been killed in combat. Her life “gave the show a quality of credibility to white audiences, but received a great deal of criticism from the black community” (Cummings, 1982, p.76). Julia represented the racial stereotype of the black matriarch because she never encountered racial prejudice at work nor in the integrated well kept very middle class building she lived in. Julia was designed to overcome the received images of black people from all forms of media, whether it was vaudeville or whether it was television’s own history itself. These were fully assimilated black people, these were people who

could move into your neighborhood and not disturb you at all. The show's star Diahann Carroll, recalls that, "in the black community that (assimilation) caused a great deal of anger, they said she (Julia) was a sell out, an oreo cookie. Why does this show not represent the street where I spend my life, where I spend my time. I don't want to think about a women that has had to push herself into the middle class" (Riggs, 1991).

Supporters of the show have argued that "the show seemed to have been designed to subvert the aims and purposes of the national civil rights activists. It was meant to assuage white consciences and to make president Richard Nixon's militant actions toward the people of black ghettos more palatable"(Cummings, 1982, p.77). The duality of African-Americans in society vs. television played an important part in acceptance of "Julia" on television:

There existed almost two black Americas. There was the black America on the news which confronted racial issues head on and then there was the black America that you saw the rest of the evening on prime-time television where racial hostility was virtually absent, where harmony dictated the neighborhood, where there were no signs of any kind of struggle with segregation. So you get on screen this idealized view of how blacks and whites work together that most people knew where inaccurately depicting the reality.

(Patricia Turner quoted in Riggs, 1991)

The character of "Julia" represented the image of the "white Negro," "an over endowed character with attributes that comfort white middle class sensibility and strip him or her of anything else, so that the sense of the 'White Negro' becomes what it takes to make them acceptable"( Herman Gray quoted in Riggs, 1991). The show was

considered a “white wash” even by white society, “white people began to feel uncomfortable with the patronizing portrayal of how black life could be if blacks did not riot, but wait their turn, and work within the capitalist system” (Cummings, 1982, p.77). The networks quickly countered this criticism by stating that television is an entertainment medium, that the show was not meant to be socially and politically relevant. Julia represents a positive image, the problem was that her character was so positive, that she was implausible.

After the cancellation of “Julia,” the networks resisted airing another African-American family show immediately. Instead, the focus was on the new brand of comedy developed with the “African-American experience” in mind. The “Flip Wilson Show” serves as a perfect example of the new self-exploitation of African-Americans. Flip Wilson was the first African-American to host a successful variety show that lasted for four seasons, 1970-1974. The strength of the program was in Wilson’s own style of comedy. He was most celebrated for the bold black characters he developed:

Unlike the bourgeois images offered in situation comedies in the late 1960s his Geraldine Jones, Reverend Leroy, Sonny the janitor, Freddy Johnson the playboy, and Charley the chef were drawn from inner city stereotypes. In his own assertive way, Wilson reached back to an earlier time and revived many of the pejorative clichés associated with a less sensitive time in American history. Not since Amos ‘n’ Andy had television portrayed blacks in such stereotypic ways.

(MacDonald, 1983, p.173)

Wilson’s characters on the show reflected images from previous show that were labels as negative and stereotypic portrayals of African-Americans:



Geraldine Jones could shriek: “the devil mad me do it” as well as Sapphire Stevens, “Beulah” or any of the other video mammies of the past. The exaggerated, rhythmic roll of his Reverend Leroy, the effusive gospel shouting pastor of the church of “What’s Happen Now” was a solid reminder of Johnny Lee’s nefarious and loquacious character on “Amos ‘n’ Andy”, the lawyer Algonquin J. Calhoun. And his other slick personalities were throw backs to those demeaning models of black insincerity, incompetence, and libido.

(MacDonald, 1983, p.173)

If the wide approval of “the Flip Wilson Show” and his self-deprecating style of comedy suggested the acceptability of exploitative racial humor by African-American, then the programs created by Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin transformed this suggestion into an industry standard. This “new” comedy established, in part by Flip Wilson radically altered the boundaries of permissible expression in American television.

Lear and Yorkin represent the first steps toward showing reality in American households: “People grew intolerant of these perfect prime-time families on TV. Throughout television’s history the prime-time family had been a sanctuary against social crisis” (Riggs, 1991). The ensuing African-American television families created by Lear and Yorkin for prime-time were a microcosm of that historic synthesis achieved during the 1970s with regard to African-American on television: “In one instant, the exposure of African-American entertainer was heightened, more roles, more employment, more African-American oriented shows. Yet, there was almost total relegation of African-American to comedies” (Churchill, 1970, p.49). The image of African-American in television since the nineteenth century has been that of clowns and

buffoons. They appeared in the 1970s as the latest embodiment of a format traditional acceptable to Caucasian audiences. Any measure of achievement by African-Americans was shadowed by the manifestation of the quality of humor, "by content and portrayal African-American in television comedy enter what might be called the Age of the New Minstrelsy"(Ross, 1995, p.110).

The "Flip Wilson Show," "the Jeffersons," a spin off from "All in the Family," "Good Times," and "What's Happening" each enjoyed top ratings during various time frames from 1972 until 1983 by utilizing lackluster versions of Minstrel comedy. African-Americans were stars of the shows, but the quality of the characterization and the content of the shows compromised the goals of the Civil Rights Movement (ending the use of demeaning, stereotypic portrayal in the film and television industry):

They portrayed the "coon" that is those characters who were loud, conniving and ostentatious. This image was portrayed in the show "The Jeffersons" by Sherman Hemsley in the character of boisterous George Jefferson for ten years and by Jimmy Walker as grinning J.J. in "Good Times" for five years The ever enduring character of the loud but lovable "mammy" types shown in the character of Louise Jefferson and Florence the maid of "the Jeffersons" and Aunt Esther, a very loud, over bearing, purse swinging, bible preaching character created by LaWanda Page in "Sanford and Son".

(Cummings, 1982, p.78)

In addition to the use of traditionally demeaning portrayals of African-Americans, the situation comedies reflected stereotypic images of African-American culture:

With the 1970s situation comedies on the African-American family, we were told once again that all African-American lived in the ghetto, were poor, lazy, unemployed and if not on welfare, were living from hand to mouth. Those who were industrious like the father and mother on “Good Times” and Mable “Mama” Thompson on “What’s Happening” would lose their jobs and find it difficult to get another. Those who were lazy and not really looking for work could find jobs easily and were not satisfied with them like J.J. of “Good Times.”

(Cummings, 1982, p.78)

To counter the negative stereotypes of poverty created by “Sanford and Son,” “Good Times” and “What’s Happening,” African-Americans were given “the Jeffersons,”

George Jefferson a self-made, self-sufficient millionaire with a loving and supportive wife, a well behaved, intelligent son, and a wise-cracking maid. George owned several dry cleaning stores; employed blacks and whites, contributed (through his wife) time and money to worthy causes; and extolled (through his son) black consciousness.

(Cummings, 1982 p.79)

Unfortunately for every positive feature of “the Jeffersons” character of George, he had at least two negatives, “he was not only a loud and boisterous, he was ostentatious, ignorant, a bigot, and a chauvinist, he was the African-American version of Archie Bunker of “All in the Family” fame.

One main criticism of such shows was the inability to provide a mixture of the ridiculous and the serious, to somewhat balance the image of African-Americans.

“Good Times” was an attempt to replicate “All In the Family” but make it more

relevant to what was going on in black communities, as far as unemployment and poverty” (Herman Gray quoted in Riggs, 1991). With “Good Times,” the ridiculous simply outweighed the serious concerns that were attempted in the show: “There would have been nothing wrong with “Good Times” if there were also programs showing highly successful, determined blacks dealing with social problems in a responsible way”(Jackson, 1982, p.24). “Good Times” had great potential to succeed or fail. It was the “first Prime-time show to feature a black family with both mother and father in the heart of a Chicago ghetto” (Riggs, 1991). It was an inner city family that was nuclear and solid. The show talked about real world issues of discrimination and racism, and how an African-American family would handle them. Unfortunate, they chose the “old familiar” and downplayed the family and relevant issues and elevate the role of J.J. from sometime humorist to outright buffoon: “J.J.’s function was to deflate the potential tension build up in particular issues the show was trying to address. In retrospect it was a clever use of a character to relieve the show of any kind of political bite it might of have had”(Herman Gray quoted in Riggs, 1991). John Amos, a long time actor and co-star on the show , was one of the loudest critics of the show. John Amos is;

A highly principle actor who cares a great deal about how black people were portrayed on television. He understood more over, the power of television and how difficult it is to erase images from the public’s mind, especially those which support a stereotype: It was very easy for the producer of “Good Times” to fall back on the familiar ways of making people laugh about blacks. Using language that’s too sophisticated, ill-fitting clothes and a value system that puts pleasure at the top.

(Patricia Turner quoted in Riggs, 1991)

The J.J. character, “a loud mouthed, grinning ‘coon’ of a son, on the show received too much attention from the writers and therefore considerable negative criticism from the public”(Cummings, 1982, p.79). J.J. was simply a younger version of the Kingfish of ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy’ fame. He had a trademark saying, “Dyn-o-mite” that is reminiscent of Kingfish’s “Holy Mack’l.” The J.J. character also popped his eyeballs a lot and showed a huge toothy grin often at inappropriate times”(Cummings, 1982, p.80). John Amos eventually left the show in 1977, frustrated as he noticed more and more buffoon and coon parts for J.J. Despite the strong, proud, determined image of the father and loving, respectable, supportive mother figure, it was extremely hard to combat J.J.’s image. Esther Rolle, who played the role of the mother, left shortly after. The show was canceled in 1979, having run for five years.

The third stage of development concludes in 1982 and marks the transition into what has been called the “Golden Age of Television” for African-American. The fourth stage of development marks an era of positivity and realism in televisions history.

## CHAPTER 5

### DEVELOPMENT STAGE FOUR

#### Historical Overview

The fourth stage constitutes the 1980s, a period that brought about a more socially conscious theme for African-American television with programs like “the Cosby Show” and “Frank’s Place” that raised social issues and reinforced family values. The fourth development stage held African-American actors to a higher standard and made them accountable to their peers.

*What is the new role of African-Americans in contemporary comedies?* African-Americans were demanding realistic portrayals in television. They no longer saw themselves as just happy-go-lucky blacks living in poverty. African-Americans were aware of their economic status in the United States. They watched as Reagan’s ideology of the “Trickle Down Theory” failed, businesses closed, African-American unemployment reached an all time high. There are two shows that stand out as milestones in the portrayal of African-American in television sitcoms, one widely accepted by society as a whole, the other critically acclaimed by its peers.

The ratings champion of the two, “The Cosby Show,” was an half hour situation comedy about a upper middle-class black family, the Huxtables. The second show, “Frank’s Place,” only lasted one season. It was highly praised for being the most realistic

portrayal of African-Americans on television. The show challenged the audience with issues that were highly controversial:

“Frank’s Place” may have required too much work; it may have asked too much of an audience for which African-American culture remained a fuzzy and distant experience. In this sense the show’s commercial failure shaped the focus on black audiences at the same time it pushed the networks and their program suppliers toward more conventional shows featuring blacks. The commercial failure of “Frank’s Place” resecured the center of the genre of situation comedy rather than inviting exploration of the margins.

(Gray, 1995, p.125).

According to Gates (Riggs, 1991), the perceived role of African-American portrayal in television is now split between those viewing “the Cosby Show” as the realistic image of African-Americans living the American dream and those viewing the show as irrelevant and non-reflective of the majority of African-American families. And finally, those who felt society missed the boat on “Frank’s Place”.

*Are there accurate portrayals of African-Americans on television?* Yes, finally there are accurate portrayals in television, however the argument becomes who offers the most comprehensive representation of African-Americans.

The Cosby Show never offered the audience the slightest glimpse of the economic disadvantages and deep-rooted discrimination that prevent most African-American from reaching their potential. Cliff Huxtable, played by Bill Cosby, is a gynecologist and obstetrician. His wife Claire is a lawyer who eventually becomes a partner in her law firm. They have four daughters and one son. In later episodes in-laws

and grandchildren are acquired. The show takes place in their New York City brownstone home:

Is perhaps this lack of acknowledgment of the underside of the American dream that is the most unfortunate feature of the Huxtable opulence. Cosby defends against linking the authenticity of the Huxtable representation of black life to the apparently contradictory luxury the family lives in when he says: “to say that they aren’t black enough is a denial of the American dream and the American way of life. My point is that this is an American family - an *American family* -- and if you want to live like they do, and you’re willing to work, the opportunity is there.

(Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p.7).

The Cosby Show’s advisor, Alvin Poussaint, was highly critical of the 1970’s shows like “the Jeffersons,” “Sanford and Son,” and “Good Times,” “which were full of Jivin’, Jammin’, streetwise style stuff that is the worst kind of stereotyping (quoted in Hartsbough 1989)” (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p.2). The Cosby Show had its share of backlash by critics of the show’s version of reality. The show has been accused of “presenting a misleading cozy picture, a sugar candy world unfettered by racism, crime, and economic deprivation... the Huxtable charmed life is so alien to the experience of most black people they are no longer ‘Black’ at all” (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p.3). Henry Louis Gates, a major critic of “the Cosby Show” argues whether the Cosby Show is a positive image:

As long as all blacks were represented in demeaning or peripheral roles it was possible to believe that American racism was as it were indiscriminate. The social vision of Cosby however reflecting the



minuscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class reassuringly  
throws the blame for black poverty back on to the impoverished.

(Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p.3)

According to Gray:

we have this incredible polarization of rich and poor, and black people  
converged around the poverty end of that. I think having a show that  
mediates between that polarization, we come away with a sense in which  
that society is fine. You just have to work hard, have the right values,  
have the right desires, and aspirations, then it will be all right.

(Herman Gray quoted in Riggs, 1991)

The Cosby Show has been accused of not addressing racism or just not being relevant,  
“in many ways the Huxtable household favored prime-time families of old. The TV  
family was a mythic sanctuary, a shield against social crisis. Within the polarization of  
1980s America this dream of the happy, harmonious, successful black family held a  
powerful seduction”(Riggs, 1991). As Bill Cosby and Alvin Pouissant point out, “few  
other sitcoms are attacked for their failure to deal with issues of racism, a particularly  
unfair constraint to put on a situation comedy”(Fever, 1995, p.43). Pouissant goes on to  
say that;

one of the most useful aspects of Cosby’s dismantling of racial  
mythology and stereotyping is that it has permitted America to view  
black folks as human beings. Here at last are media representations of  
successful and attractive black people whom white people can respect,  
admire, and even identify with.

(Jhally & Lewis, 1992 p.5)

As Cosby evaded relevant issues concerning African-Americans, “Frank’s Place” attacked them head on. While “Frank’s Place” was the one show African-Americans felt outshines “the Cosby Show”, Henry Louis Gates comments, “that for many people, ‘Frank’s Place’ was the best program about African-American life for a very long time, largely because it portrayed a diverse, interesting and believable range of black character types, but it was quickly brought off air by its low ratings”(Gates quoted in Riggs, 1991).

*Does society still support or believe in the utilization of stereotyped roles?* The United States is a country that is still emerging from a deeply racist history, a society in which many whites and blacks living in segregated world yet the most popular television show among both audiences was not only about a black family but a family portrayed without any of the demeaning stereotypical images of the people common in mainstream popular culture.

Bill Cosby received critical acclaim for creating not only a witty and thoughtful sitcom but also an enlightened step forward in race relations: “After decades of degrading media images of black people in other shows, the Huxtable family presented black characters that black and white audiences could relate too... the show was conceived in contrast to the stereotypical shows that proceed it” (Hammer, 1992, p.70). *Are African-Americans still willing to play stereotyped roles for monetary gain?* For the first time there was rejection of traditional stereotyped images for the realistic image of “the Cosby Show.” Actor Tim Reid praised the show as ““a breath of fresh air’, showing at last ‘the reality of what was good about our neighborhoods, a reality of what was good about a black childhood” (Johnston & Ettema, 1982, p.18). “The Cosby Show” overcame traditional stereotypes while remaining funny and tremendously

popular. Regardless to whether you viewed “the Cosby Show” as not reflective of the majority of African-Americans lifestyle, no one was willing to accept any of the buffoonish, demeaning, stereotypic portrayals of the past. The images of characters on “the Cosby Show” set the industry standard to which all actor were held.

*How does the current portrayal differ from those previously seen?* The television series of the 1970s offered nothing positive for African-Americans audiences. Shows like “the Jeffersons,” “Good Times” and “Sanford and Son” only helped to normalize negative images and stereotypical portrayals. The success of “the Cosby Show,” according to Gates, has led to a curious divergence between media images and social realities: “this is the Cosby decade. The show’s unprecedented success in depicting the lives of affluent blacks has exercised a profound influence on television in the last half of the 1980s... Cosby’s success has led to the flow of TV sitcoms that feature the black middle class, each of which takes its lead from ‘the Cosby Show’” (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p.6). It was not until “the Cosby Show aired in 1984 that television would begin to seriously address black families on a continuing basis. The fourth stage of development proves thus far to be the most significant mainly because it is the first positive portrayals of African-Americans in television sitcoms. “The Cosby Show” and many will argue “Frank’s Place” are two realistic portrayals of African-American life. Whether one is more prevailing then the other is not consequential, the actuality that Cliff Huxtable or Frank Parish are not posturing and shouting “Dyn-o-mite” or “Holy Mack’l” immortalizing stereotypes.

#### Interpretive Analysis

While “the Cosby Show” was responsible for paving the way for these African-American family shows, “It was the only one to be criticized about its portrayal of

African-American family life, some of the criticism were, “that the series is not black enough; it is not relevant enough; and it is not true to the life of the black family”(Samuels, 1997, p.58).

One concern was the image of the United States depicted by “the Cosby Show.” The image transcends the television show itself, creating new norms in society:

The more general trends that “the Cosby Show” has stimulated a trend toward the proliferation of middle and upper class black characters on television. This trend is not the boost for positive race relations that it appears to be.... in fact that the presence of these apparently benign images of black people on television constitutes for African-Americans a serious step backward. “The Cosby Show” by incorporating a black family into the American dream plays an important part in this ideological process. It symbolizes the fairness of the American system. The fact that the Huxtables are an African-American family is central to this process: their success assures us that in the United States everyone, regardless of race or creed can enjoy material success.

(Jhally & Lewis, 1982, p.73)

“Frank’s Place” aired on CBS during 1987-1988 season. The series starred Tim Reid as a university professor, Frank Parrish. He inherits a restaurant from his father and decides to run it. The cast of characters includes various professional men and women from the community as well as the restaurant staff representing an authentic multicultural society which at the same time provided an accessible way of discussing issues relating to multi-ethnic America. “Frank’s Place” only lasted one season. Many

felt it was because the show challenged people to think about issues that television had spent decades attempting to hide:

It was precisely because the show attempted to show a realistic portrait of black community life and the relationship between black and white Americans that marked its downfall: “Frank’s Place” was too real for Americans. It was the closest thing to the reality I experienced growing up and the reality I now experience as a person of color in American society... and I don’t think that the average white American is prepared to encounter the full complexity of that reality. They want to encounter fictions of that reality which are palatable to them.

(Gates quoted in Riggs, 1991)

White Americans argue that “Frank’s Place” was essentially domesticated into just another ordinary sitcom because television was simply unable to handle the issue of racial difference (Riggs, 1991). “Frank’s Place” exposed viewers to issues that America was still struggling with. If there was no comic relief, as J.J. was utilized in “Good Times” to take the impact off the issues addressed seemingly Americans were not interested in the show.

While the show struggled to find a permanent day and time slot, the popularity with African-American viewers was maintained. The consistent broadcast schedule changes posed a serious handicap for the show’s ratings “despite the limitations on more challenging story lines and the lack of sufficient (White) audience to ensure continued air-time, the show was highly successful with black viewers, largely due to its inclusion of people, locations and circumstances which are rarely represented on television” (Ross, 1996, p.100).

Low rates and a unstable time slot enviably led to the cancellation;

Critically, “Frank’s Place” received rave reviews. It was hailed by television critics and the public as innovative and refreshing television. Because of the absence of a laugh track, the lack of traditional resolutions at the end of each episode, and the show’s blending of comedy and drama, Frank’s Place was referred to by many critics and industry observers as a “dramedy.”

(Gray, 1995, p.117)

The appeal of “Frank’s Place” came from the realistic depiction of African-American culture and society, “socially and aesthetically, the distinctive characters of “Frank’s Place” derived from a variety of historical, generic, and aesthetic elements: situation comedy, the workplace family, American racial memory, shows about region and location, and the tradition of black situation comedy” (Gray, 1995, p.119). In “Frank’s Place” the culture and history of African American people was essential to the lives of the character and the structure of the show:

The success or otherwise of a television series is largely dependent on audience ratings and if “Frank’s Place” did not offer a mass audience exactly what it wanted, “the Cosby Show” suffered no such defect. It television fictions normalize the universe and package it in such a way as to make it palatable and pleasurable to the majority audience, “the Cosby Show” was and continued to be adept in giving the audience precisely what it wants.

(Ross, 1996, p.100)

The following is a scene taking from an episode of “Frank’s Place” address the issues of the “color complex” within new Orleans African-American community as Frank plans to join a exclusive club:

Anna-May: He shouldn’t be off gallivanting with a bunch of snobs that are laughing at him behind his back because he’s colored. He ot’ to be just here letting us...

Frank: I’m colored! What do you mean I’m colored? I haven’t heard that word in 20 years. What do you mean?

Anna-May: It’s nothing Frank.

Frank: No! I want to know!

Anna-May: (Walks to a shelf and picks up a paper bag) See this bag?

Frank: Yeah!

Anna-May: Which is darker me or the bag?

Frank: You.

Anna-May: (extending Frank’s arm) Which is darker you or the bag?

Frank: What are you talking about?

Anna-May: The “Capital C Club” in the old days Frank, if you were a light skin black you were Creole, and they spelled Creole with a capital “C”. If you were a dark skin black you spelled Creole with a little “c” and it was a big difference between the two.

Tiger: Skin color used to be the big separator in New Orleans.

Anna-May: It still is, they just ain’t as out in the open about it.

Frank: Why would Ozel have me out there?

Next scene at the “Capital “C” club”:

Frank: So what was I going to be the first darky in the “Capital “C” Club”?

Ozel: Oh man! I’m sorry I should have been more up front with you. There’s a group of us in the club that are trying to change things.

Frank: And I’m the Guinea pig?

Ozel: Well sort of see you got all the credentials to put an end to this whole color thing.

Frank: Ozel let me cut to the chase. All my life I’ve been the quote “only black.” The only back in my class, the only black in this organization, the only black on this team! I’m not about to become the only black in a black club! I think that’s going a little too far don’t you think!

(Riggs, 1991)

Where “Frank’s Place” dealt with compelling issues affecting the African-American Community, “the Cosby Show” evaded those topics:

The Cosby Show never address racial issues up front, however they did at time allude to issues. The naming of the Huxtables’ first grandchildren is a typical example of “the Cosby Show’s” quiet style. “Their (Cliff and Clair) eldest daughter Sondra, decides to call her twins Nelson and Winnie. The episode that deals with this decision highlights the issue of naming but makes no comment on the chosen names’ overt political connotations. There reference to the Mandelas is made quietly and



unobtrusively, relying upon the audience's ability to catch the political ramifications of the statement.

(Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p.4)

Both sitcom offer different approaches to address issues concerning African-Americans. The "Cosby Show" used, if at all, a subtle or more evasive approach to addressing societal issues. Cosby instantaneously defends the shows non-political stand;

"Why must I make all the black social statements", My family here is not going to sit around for half an hour and do black versus white, versus brown, versus Asian jokes so people can say "this is a Black show."

What critic are saying is - well if you're not going to talk about these (Black) issues then why are you there?

(Hill, 1992, p.105)

Yet, "the Cosby Show" was very conscious of the images of African-Americans it reflected to the American public:

"Black Language" is deliberately not heard on "the Cosby Show"...a conscious decision has been made to refrain from using jive language or nonstandard Black dialect. Sweaters, African-American clothing and jewelry worn by both family members and friends, non-straightened/natural Black hair, and many other features have all been reportedly noticed by the viewing public. Emphasis, whether regarding educational values or clothing styles, has been on Black dignity.

(Fuller, 1992, p.132)

Where “the Cosby show” felt no responsible toward addressing political or social issues, “Frank’s Place” took them on. Probing topics such as “the color complex” among African-Americans, inter-racial dating, and Affirmative Action for instance. Both “Frank’s Place” and “the Cosby Show” experienced different level of success while projecting equally positive depiction of African-Americans. Consequently, were African-American first fought for non-demeaning, realistic portrayal, now that it has been achieved the battle transcends to whose positive image do I want?

As an important stage in the development of African-American portrayal concludes with the final episode of “the Cosby show” airing on April 30, 1992. Many ponder what “life after Cosby” would bring. As Cosby ended to new network battle for their share of the viewing audience. Ensuing a new caliber of situation comedy is introduced, transitioning African-Americans into the fifth stage of development.

## CHAPTER 6

### DEVELOPMENT STAGE FIVE

#### Historical Overview

The development and portrayal of African-Americans in television has undergone another transition from the 1980s. The family based situation comedy “The Cosby Show” was the most popular show of the fourth stage setting, the standard which African-American situation comedies strove to meet. The fifth stage of development represents a return to negative images and stereotypic portrayals that constitute the portrayal seen in stages one through three.

*What is the new role of African-Americans in television?* The 1990’s offered African-American actors more lucrative opportunities because of the success of “the Cosby Show”. Unfortunately, the demand for African-American situation comedies did not lead to high demand for African-American actors. They are slowly being replaced by stand-up comedians. This transition from actors to comedians in the fifth stage represents the development of a new brand of comedy. This brand of comedy uses irreverence, satire, and spectacle to attract audiences, reinventing traditional stereotypes and negative images to accommodate today’s audience.

*Are there accurate portrayals of African-American on television?* With NBC, CBS, ABC and FOX, along with the start of two new networks WB and UPN, the nightly line up of situation comedies featuring African-American is overwhelming. The images

on television constitute a mixture of all previous stages of development.

The success of “The Cosby Show” was a tremendous boost for African-American visibility on television. However, much has been lost in the images projected from “The Cosby Show” to shows such as “Martin,” “In Living Color,” “Homeboys in Outer Space,” and “The Fresh Prince of Bel Air.” Television critic Donald Bogle explains:

when it comes to blacks on TV we get a steady diet of comedy. For years now it has been sitcom after sitcom, a perpetual laugh fest. Even when there is a serious theme on one of these shows, it tends to be laughed away... we have made very little progress on TV ... which means that we have hardly evolved at all since the days when Ethel Waters brought “Beulah” the maid into America’s living rooms ... the history of Blacks on prime-time network series like that of Black films has been fraught with its own peculiar set of contradictions, its own array of internal frictions and frustrations and its own tiny evolutionary steps

(Boyd, 1996, p.22).

The fifth stage of development symbolizes a slow demise of the family based situation comedy and a revival of slap stick, stereotypic caricatures of African-American life, “Ironically the nineties was supposed to showcase a renaissance in black entertainment. Networks and advertisers have realized that the black community is hungry for programming that reflects its images. But the shows they come up with are pathetic” (McKissack, 1997, p.38). As a way to rectify or change the negative and stereotypic portrayals of African-Americans constantly utilized on television. Many African-American actors sought creative control of programs featuring them in lead

roles. This was first demonstrated by the “Flip Wilson Show” continuing through “The Cosby Show.” According to Flip Wilson, creative control was needed “to show the realism of African-American life from their own perspective”(MacDonald, 1983, p.173). Unfortunately, the positive images, realism and relevance achieved in the 1980s situation comedies was lost to the 1990s situation comedies surrounded by spectacle, parody, and invective humor.

*Does society still support or believe in the utilization of stereotyped roles?* The utilization of stereotyped roles in situation comedies had primarily been done away with in the 1980s. While “The Cosby Show” aired and after its cancellation, networks attempted to emulate the success of the show. Unfortunately, there has been no other situation comedy that has come close to the rating of “The Cosby Show.” With family based situation comedies like “Family Matters” and “Moesha” which are hits on their respective networks, they, however, did not capture high ratings outside of the African-American market. These minimally successful shows led to the reexamining of the situation comedy format and the inevitable return to the format pre-Cosby era. The return to formidable situation comedy strategies that utilize the buffoon, dim witted, or clown portrayals, were implemented into virtually every new comedy.

The sketch comedy show “In Living Color” was popular with both Caucasian and African-American audiences. The show was reminiscent of two comedy genres, the minstrel show and the variety show; the minstrel show because of its negative and stereotypic caricature of African-American people. By depicting Africa-Americans as lazy, unintelligent, homeless, incarcerated, and unemployed people introduced a type of the mirror-and-mask effect established on the minstrel show circuit, “The mirror implied

that African-Americans did so well in the Minstrelsy role because they were only acting natural. While the mask represents the hidden reality of African-American humor”(Toll, 1974, p.143). Secondly, “In Living Color’ is reminiscent of the “Flip Wilson Show” variety show with the mixture of parody, spectacle, and invective within sketch comedy. The “Flip Wilson Show” pushed the envelop with its self-exploitive brand of comedy a style of comedy “In Living Color” would incorporate into it format.

*Are African-Americans still willing to play stereotyped roles for monetary gain?*

After copying “the Cosby Show” formula on several failed sitcoms, network executives see the Cosby phenomenon as a one time achievement and now “are unwilling to push past common themes and characters when it comes to blacks and other ethnic minorities”(McKissack, 1997, p.38). The non-threatening television comedies that avoided controversial or serious issues that the viewing majority evidently like so much seem the very shows that insult intelligent people: “Many sitcoms and variety shows take black culture outside the framework of the black experience for fun and profit. This is electronic black on black crime, since it’s ultimately blacks doing it to each other” (Spigner, 1994, p.10).

The show “Martin,” as well, seems to revel in the dim-witted, anti-intelligent, self absorbed street style of its main character, played by comedian Martin Lawrence: “he has range, but is rarely given the chance to do anything but be a clown. Martin shares the anti-feminism of Archie Bunker and is the antithesis of the funny but intelligent Heathcliff Huxtable”(McKissack, 1997, p.39).

Further, “In Living Color” was among those shows which were heavily accused of exploiting aspects of African-American culture. “ ‘In Living Color’ and ‘Martin’

devalued black women with demeaning drag routines”(Spigner, 1994, p.8). These portrayals are far more degrading than Flip Wilson’s Geraldine Jones which in itself was a far more disturbing image than that of Sapphire Stevens on “Amos ‘n’ Andy”. African-Americans are pigeon holing themselves into simpleminded comedies once again.

The big four networks, NBC, CBS, ABC, and FOX, have only a few of shows centered around African-Americans, while two up-starting networks UPN and WB have anchored their programming with comedies featuring African-Americans. Of the twenty-one shows the two networks debuted with, eleven were comedies. UPN entertainment president, Mike Sullivan states, “we have to counter program, so we went after (black) talent in a big way, .... comedies have a great track record. Success dictates where you go.” President and Chief executive officer, Lucie Salhany, adds, “we wanted the funniest comedies we could get ... comedy is comedy and people want to laugh. Comedies are the engines that drive the train. Dramas centered around black families fail, and usually fail quickly”(McKissack, 1996, p.38). When FOX started to challenge the big three networks in the 1980s and 1990s, it was with shows that centered on African-American. The most successful was “Martin”: “this strategy was a success for FOX, because at one time the network was attracting 38 percent of black viewers. UPN and WB have borrowed that strategy and it has paid off. WB’s ‘the Wayans Brothers’ for example has 11.7 percent of black households, although it only captures 2.7 percent of all households”(McKissack, 1997, p.39).

*How does the current portrayal differ from those previously seen?* “In Living Color’s” appearance on commercial network television was enabled by a number of related social circumstances. The popularity of rap music and urban based films

encouraged networks to explore more diverse programming. In television, the commercial success and dominance of “the Cosby Show” in the 1980s and the aesthetic impact of “Frank’s Place” provided opportunities for future African-American shows. Those are just two reasons “In Living Color,” in particular executive producer, Keenan Ivory Wayan, was given the freedom to create one of 1990s most popular show. “The Cosby Show” had proven to be a television phenomenon, “this show is changing the white community’s perspective of black Americans. It’s doing far more to instill positive racial attitudes than if Bill came at the viewer with a sledgehammer of a sermon”(Fuller, 1992, p.133). The positivity of “the Cosby Show” and “Frank’s Place” was not advanced by “Martin” or “In Living Color,” the show successors. Instead a digression to the traditional comedic format with stereotypic portrayal and negative images resurfaces to reclaim its position in African-American programs.

#### Interpretive Analysis

In 1990 “In Living Color” took over the airwaves with a multi-racial cast changing the face of African-American television comedy. With the show’s exploitation of African-American culture and the blatant disregard for the seriousness of any issue made a target out of anyone and everything:

“In Living Color” transposed the social location and cultural meaning of “blackness” in terms of African-American discourse and the vectors of sexuality, gender, and class. Because “In Living Color” formally depends on a complex ensemble of black cultural practices such as music, media, dance, language, dress, style, urban youth culture, it realigns and balances different racially organized subject positions. Some of the show’s appeal



rest with its, often troubling, rendering and interrogation of the complex relations and locations of African-American life.

(Gray, 1992, p.132)

It should come as no surprise that FOX is the television network on which “In Living Color” is aired. As the newest network in the industry facing declining network television viewers, FOX was in a position to take risk with shows like “In Living Color” and established its competitive position with a line-up of low-cost and occasionally innovative shows: “ ‘In Living Color’ benefited from network television’s attempt to capitalize on the commercial success of African-American youth culture, especially the popularity of rap and African-American cinema”(Carter, 1996, p. B1).

This popularity of African-American youth culture, together with the title of executive producer, gave Keenan Ivory Wayans control over all aspect of “In Living Color” especially in hiring writers, selecting material, assembling the cast and production crew, and generally defining the direction and look of the show (Gray, 1995, p.133). Wayans developed a show which could address issues while providing enough comic relief to refrain from offending the viewing audience.

What is significant about “In Living Color’s” initial success as well its use of sketch comedy was its strategy of parody representing the exploration of African-American social and cultural life. “In Living Color” was also enabled by and linked to political and social discourses including,

The reemergence of various strains of nationalism (including the cultural force of the Nation of Islam in the symbolism and atheistic of rap and hip-hop); debates over multicuturalism, affirmative action, and political

correctness on college campuses; debates about gender relations, feminism, and sexuality; and contention over the agenda and direction of black political strategies and aspiration. Jesse Jackson's presidential candidacy, Louis Farrakhan's musings on the state of black America, the rise of new conservative voices in the black community and the senate confirmation hearing on Clarence Thomas's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court were all, at one time or another, the subject of sketches on the show.

(Gray, 1995, p.135)

Much of the show's controversy centers around responsibilities in constructing and representing images of African-Americans. "In Living Color" has a target audience of both Caucasian and African-American ranging from 14-25 years of age (Gray, 1995, p.136). One of the show's African-American writers, Franklyn Ajaye, has been one of the most visible and outspoken critics of the conception and representation of the "Black experience" on "In Living Color". Ajaye goes further to state, "this whole urban rap thing needs to pull back some...[The] ghetto is being gloried, and there's nothing good about the ghetto except getting out of one"(Gray, 1995, p.136).

"In Living Color" features a wide range of themes, among the most significant are sexuality (e.g., the men on film sketches, sketches featuring Prince or Michael Jackson), masculinity and gender relations (e.g., sketches about a female animal trainer who trains men and advises women on how best to control [black] men in relationship) racism (e.g., sketches featuring Homey the Clown, Frenchy, Anton, the black cafe, Cephus and Reesy, Benita Betrell, two black talent agents from Funky Finger Productions in Compton),

Nationalism and Political (e.g., sketches about Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan and Clarence Thomas), and black popular culture (e.g., sketches on Arsenio Hall, Oprah Winfrey and Michael Jackson). In many ways “In Living Color” was a rendition of previously aired African-American situation comedy. The show achieved large scale popularity with white and black audiences, similar to “Good Times,” and “the Cosby Show.” And like the others, “In Living Color” was criticized for ignoring or down playing issues affecting African-American:

Aesthetically, “In Living Color” reorganizes specific images, themes, and events from American’s racial past as well as contemporary African-American cultural and social practices to distinguish itself from other television shows... the show depends on historical and contemporary stereotypes, white spectatorship, idealized visions of multiracial order, and role reversals for its humor, modes of address, and cultural meaning (Gray, 1995, p.138)

For instance, the blasphemy in a sketch featuring Ann Marie Johnson lampoons religious African-American women who “feel the spirit” in church. The skit treats this religious experience as if it were an Olympic contest. Stunt persons who looked like whites in black face did back flips as “the gospel” was sung by a Blues Brother like choir. The irreverence of the skit pokes fun at African-American religious practices.

Kim Wayans and David Allen Grier portrayal of “Cephus and Reesy” a singing duo that lack intelligence, dignity but, mostly talent. The spectacle that is “Cephus and Reesy” out weighs the actual humor of the sketch. The two are always overly dressed in exaggerated costumes (another popular portrayal of African-Americans on television)

and find themselves performing for a predominately white crowd singing inappropriate material for the occasion: “ ‘Cephus and Reesy’ are reminiscent of the traditional stereotypic image of African-Americans dancing, singing, and acting the buffoon”(Gray, 1995, p.142).

In the parody of the “Home Shopping Network,” titled “the Homeboy Shopping Network” Tommy Davidson and Damon Wayans are the host of the show which takes place in the back or outside of a truck. The two salesman dressed in clothing reflective of hip-hop type fashion selling their stolen merchandise, with the enthusiasm of the “crazy salesman” image. While attempting to sell their stolen merchandise they are mindful to keep a close eye out for the police. Their show usually concluded with the two fleeing the scene to avoid police apprehension.

In a parody of PBS’s “This Old House,” Anton (Damon Wayans), a homeless black man, instructed the audience on the complexities of constructing a shelter out of cardboard. The depiction of Anton as the expert in the sketch satirized the well-known series in which a host and remodeling expert instructs (white) middle-class homeowners in the challenges and joys of restoring old houses. Within these sketches,

common sense assumptions about citizenship, property, and social class were parodied, and hence the ironic juxtaposition of class and race with familiar tropes of middle-class home ownership and unemployed homelessness was made explicit. Politically, these images are especially effective because they disturb the presumed separation of these discourses” in effect, they are reconfigured and politicized by their relocation to the same discursive space.

(Gray, 1995, p.140)

Through the parody and irony of these sketches “In Living Color” calls attention to the exclusion of African-Americans in middle and upper class society and the normalization of this class and race exclusion:

“In Living Color” does not offer a plausible picture of American society as open and pluralistic. Nor does it, taken as a whole, suggest that the American dream is accessible to people of color. Ironically, its subtext seems to be that whether individual Africa-Americans are “deficient” or “gifted” has mattered little to white society, which has historically viewed them as “all alike.”

(Gray, 1995, p.140)

The situation comedy “Martin” stars comedian Martin Lawrence as a talk radio host. One of FOX’s most successful show when it began in the late 1980s, “Martin” has been criticized for falling back on traditional stock characters, characters reminiscent of those portrayed on the “Flip Wilson Show.” Martin Lawrence takes on many characters on the show including, Mrs. Payne (his mother), Sha’nanay, (the next door neighbor who is constantly antagonizing his girlfriend), Jerome (the self proclaimed ladies man) and several other recurring characters. The African-American cast of characters does comprise a mix of professionals and domestically employed, including advertising executives and a sanitation worker.

There are two optional comedic formats utilized in a episode of the show. Formats that are reminiscent of “Amos ‘n’ Andy” and “the Jeffersons” comedic style are modernized for today’s viewer. The two formats such as the troublesome mother and the intrusive friends, utilize the comedic device of invective in every episode. The male cast is generally seen together, usually in Martin’s apartment where they are involved in some

scheme that must be kept from the women. The two optional end results of every episode were either that the women uncover the scheme or the realization of the classic misunderstanding that gets out of control. This realization usually takes the brain power of the entire group to figure it out. This, in addition to the endless exchange of insults and derogatory statements, completes the formula for nineties situation comedies.

“Martin’s” comedic trademark is one of the traditional stereotypic portrayal in situation comedy, the exchanging of jokes, in the form of insult or attacks against the other person, know as playing the “dozen.” The “dozen” was made popular on television by shows like “Amos ‘n’ Andy” with Kingfish and Mama, “the Jeffersons,” with George and Florence the maid, “Good Times,” between siblings J.J. and Thelma, and “Sanford and Son” with Fred and Aunt Esther. The show rigidly utilized that style of comedy making the new “dozens” team for the nineties, Martin and Pam.

Martin’s many portrayals of women characters “devalue Black women with demeaning drag routines” (Spigner, 1995, p.10). The portrayals have been criticized for their crude, humiliating and denigrating images of African-American women. Martin’s character of Sha’nanay is a very street wise individual who is characteristically loud in her improper use of the English language, bossy and very badly dressed in over exaggerated clothing, outfits that are more befitting a clown then a business owner. These images are seen as reflective of African-American culture, indicative with hair styles, clothing and make-up are intensely extravagant on the show.

Both “In Living Color” and “Martin” have digressed to those portrayals that had seem to vanish in the eighties with “the Cosby show” and “Franks Place.” The popularity, positive images and depiction of African-Americans in both shows offered television a new beginning in regards to correcting or changing the long standing images television

supported. Through “the Cosby Show” television proved that African-American comedy could be funny without utilizing demeaning or stereotypic roles. By reviving those images “Martin” and “In Living Color” said to viewers that comedy is better with the stereotypes and portrayals. Regardless, of “the Cosby Show’s” positive impact in the eighties, the extent of the resurgence of negative images in the nineties provides a lasting effect that’s immeasurable.

## CHAPTER 7

### DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

It has been nearly fifty years since the start of television and the image of African-American has made little advancement toward a unbiased media. The negative image and stereotypic portrayalsthat started with shows like “Beulah” and “Amos ‘n’ Andy” have only evolved into a modern reflection of old stereotypes.

According to Riggs (1991), in the first stage of development in African-American portrayal in television, the blame for negative portrayals of African-Americans was merely a reflection of the era. This could be accepted because of the plight of African Americans during the time. Jim Crow laws and segregation played a large part in the image that was perpetrated upon African-Americans on television. The economy during the formative years of television was hard for African-American people. And there where very few opportunities available to them in the television industry. Therefore, it is highly plausible that African-American actors decided to take negative roles in television that they viewed as unrealistic, negative, stereotypic portrayals of themselves mainly because it was the only pay check available to them. There has been a stereotypic myth about African-Americans maintained in many ways one of the most important of which has been through the media. Television has shown, “minorities over the years in comedic positions or in degrading ways, have omitted showing them, and have distorted them when shown. The portrayals have suggested that minorities are not interested, do not



care, are frivolous and irresponsible, and are not able to participate in the mainstream of society” (Jackson, 1992, p.21). Television has been particularly instrumental in implying, suggesting, and maintaining this myth. The characters of Rochester, Amos and Andy, Kingfish, Calhoun, and Beulah are images that gave African-Americans a distorted image of themselves. African-American society has always been hungry to see its reflection in television. Whether the image was negative did not seem important. The fact that someone of their race was on television mattered. According to McKissack (1997) in the United States African-Americans make up 12 percent of the total population, but they watch 50 percent more television than any other group, and “And black viewers watch the shows that feature black characters. ‘People are just glad to see black people on television’ ” (McKissack, 1997, p.39). This yearning for representation is true of society in the 1950s continuing through the 1990s.

Riggs (1991) described the 1960s, the second stage of development, as a turning point in television in regards to the direction it took in the portrayal of African-American. Networks that supported the Civil Rights Movement attempted to present images they felt supported the cause. The bulk of the network lineup turned into news and documentary shows to cover the events of the Civil Rights Movement and show the accurate account of the events taking place in America. Television situation comedies aired during this time as with “Julia” represented a post-civil right America. “Julia” did little for the image of African-Americans at that time. She was a representation of white American saying “if you stop the protesting and work really hard then what ‘Julia’ has can possible be your someday”. The show was irrelevant for the time, considering the struggling African-American were facing.

The third stage reflection of African-Americans in the 1970s shows a more disheartening image in portrayal. The self-exploitation of African-American culture and society was for the most part self inflicted, aside from the situation comedies created by Lear and Yorkin. African-Americans actors were involved, if not controlling, the creative aspect of their respective television shows. Therefore, why would the image of African-American not improve instead of developing into a new form of negative portrayal. Shows such as “Good Times,” “Sanford and Son,” and “What’s Happening?” were no more than the glorification of the ghetto, impregnated with the traditional utilization of stereotyped minstrel images. With shows like “Flip Wilson” that used one’s own culture and race as a punch line of a joke went far beyond the framework of realism or so called “telling it, like it is” style of comedy. No longer could the blame be placed on white America or the television industry, when demeaning, derogatory, and stereotypic portrayal of a race and culture were perpetrated by their own. In addition, the pretext of accepting negative roles as the only means of employment proved inadequate. This is indicated by actors such as Bill Cosby and Sidney Poitier’s refusal of such roles as well as the condemnation of negative portrayal led to the dismantling of popular sitcoms of the 1970s. When cast members James Amos and Ester Rolle left “Good Times” for its continued use of minstrel like comedy and neglect of important issues of the time, a message was sent to executives, that not every actor was tolerant of the industry’s continual and constant use of negative portrayal.

Riggs (1991) found that the 1980s, the fourth stage of development offered African-Americans a positive reflection of African American family life and community for the first time on television. The “Cosby Show and “Frank’s Place” were considered

“breakthrough” into the unprecedented realism because they used none of the broad plot devices or barrage of gags that define the standard sitcom..

From the beginning, “Frank’s Place” pressed the limits of dramatic and comedic television representations of Africa-Americans:

It illustrated the hegemonic strategies of containment in the commercial television system. Thus, although it challenged conventional aesthetic and generic boundaries and offered new ways to represent aspects of Black life in the United States, “Frank’s Place” did not survive the high stakes world of commercial popularity.

(Gray, 1992, p.125)

Just the opposite is true of “the Cosby Show.” The show’s immense success was equated with the criticism the show received. From cultural critics, Patricia Turner, Herman Gray, Henry Louis Gates, in “Color Adjustment.” The critics suggest that;

“The Cosby Show’s” depiction of a affluent, clean cut, close-knit, parentally controlled African-American family, epitomizing the American dream of success just was not representative of the more than half majority of African-American who do not live above the property line, much less like the Huxtables.

(Riggs, 1991)

Where “the Cosby Show” defeated the traditional myths and stereotypes about African-Americans, it created a whole new issue in regard to African-American’s acceptance and assimilation in to U.S. society. In addition to their ability or desire to achieve the American dream.

The 1990s signify the fifth stage of development in African-Americans portrayal in television. The fifth stage is a fusion of many traditional stereotypes and negative portrayals. The airing of shows like “Martin” and “In Living Color” reintroduce society to images of African-Americans that were castaway in the 1980s. Both shows extensively utilized parody and invective comedic devices, devices that shows from “Amos ‘n’ Andy” to “Good Times” have adopted. Because of this they were criticized for falling back on stock comedy styles and returning African-Americans to negative depiction. The fifth stage took already demeaning images and escalated the portrayal to levels of absurdity. After nearly fifty years of television, it would appear that African-Americans have achieved little in the advancement of positive portrayals. The achievement of “the Cosby Show” and “Frank’s Place” even the attempt of “Julia” to usher African-Americans into mainstream society can not compare to the impact and ramification of negative images. The transition from stage four to stage five in some cases proves to be a retrospective look at stages one through four. The positive development in the portrayal of African-Americans in the fourth stage has more or less been forgotten.

#### Implication for Further Research

This study investigates the development of the portrayal of African-Americans in television comedy from an historical and critical perspective. However, significant research into the Nielsen Rating system could reveal some insight into the cancellation of vast numbers of African-American situation comedies.

In addition, continual examination of situation comedy featuring African-Americans for transitional development in their portrayal in television warrants the need for future research.

Research into the Nielsen Rating System has not been thoroughly researched. Future research into the development of portrayals of African-Americans should ask: How did the distributing of Nielsen boxes affect the success of African-American situation comedy? What is the ratio of White versus black homes that have access to a Nielsen box? In addition to ask the questions to continue the examination of the portrayal of Africa-American in situation comedy: What is the new role of African-Americans in television? Are there accurate portrayals of African-Americans on television? Does society still support or believe in the utilization of stereotyped roles? Are African-Americans still willing to play stereotyped roles for monetary gain? How does the current portrayal differ from those previously seen?

Talking with and interviewing individuals in the television industry, actors and executive producers from past and presently airing situation comedies, and cultural critics will provide historical insight into past and present circumstance behind the portrayals.

It is obvious that the stages of development in the portrayal of African-Americans in situation comedy are forever evolving. Further research into this area can better explain the cause of each transition in the portrayal of Africa-Americans in television. And how the transition constitutes a new stage in the development of African-Americans portrayal in television situation comedies.

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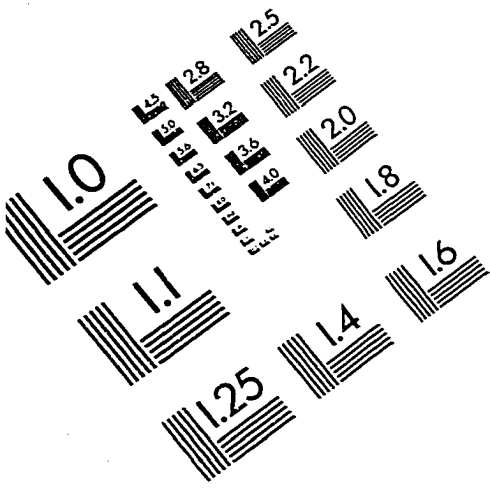
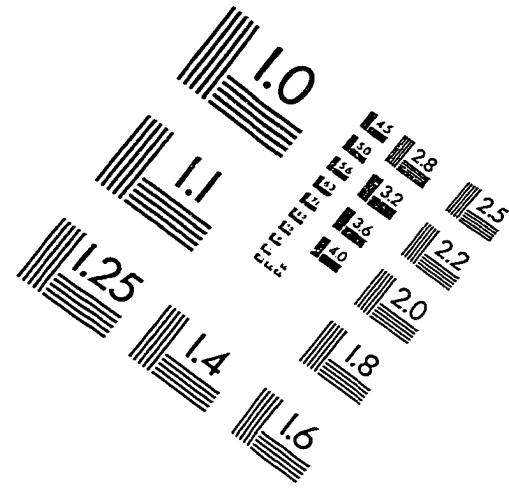
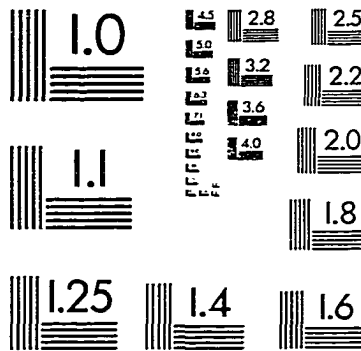
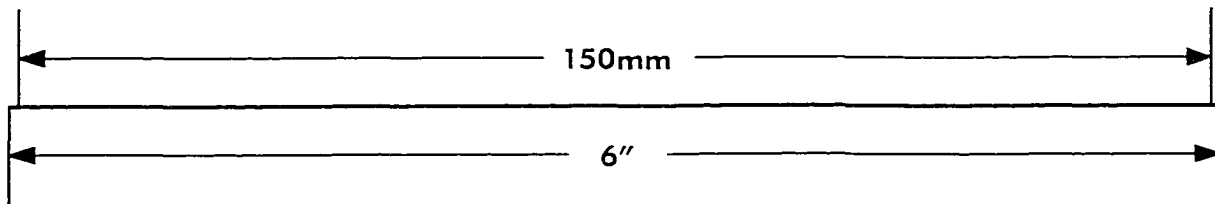
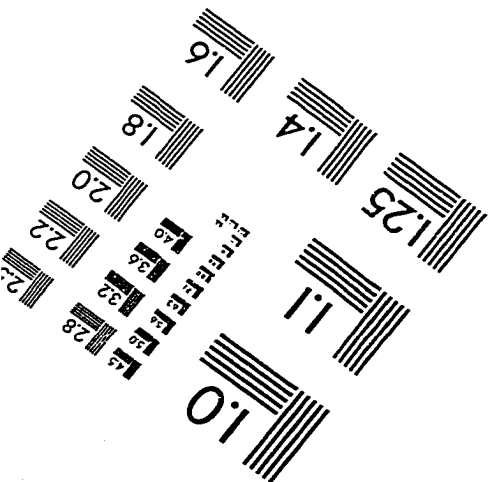
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The Stages of Development in the Portrayal of African-Americans in  
Television Comedy

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