Black*ish*: A Critical Look into the Progressiveness of Black Sitcoms



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Black*ish*: A Critical Look into the Progressiveness of Black Sitcoms

By

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I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities, as defined in the Honor Code, and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College as a whole.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	Pg 6
Introduction	Pg 7
Literary Review	Pg 10
Background	Pg 25
Analysis	Pg 31
Conclusion	Pg 44
References	Pg 48

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Introduction:

After viewing the TED talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, I realized how influential storytelling is and what an important part of our everyday lives it has on us. As Chimamanda explains in her talk, she loved reading and writing. This led her to writing stories about things she had never experienced due to the dominantly European stories she could get her hands on. Due to this she reveals that, " what this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are, in the face of a story, particularly as children" (Adichie). We grow up listening to books being read by our parents. Later on, we have the luxury to read those books and dive deeper into stories. Finally, we grow tired of reading and want to watch those very same stories and more to come. Television has so many network platforms to constantly feed us different stories that continuously show us what we should think about today.

> Because all I had were books in which characters were forgein, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners, and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the forgein books, but because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature" (Adichie).

Due to these words that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said, I chose to research black sitcoms to highlight the importance of stories and storytelling. Growing up there weren't a lot of

shows that showcased black life in a positive light, and the problematic aspect is, without my major in communications I wouldn't have been able to decipher the underlying messages that these networks choose to showcase. Over time the media has seemingly become more progressive. The media has done this by introducing controversial topics into the dialogue as well as providing "positive images" of minorities to disrupt the stereotypes they have been given. The new black sitcom, *Blackish,* seems to represent these more "progressive" stories, but I question if this is true or not. In this composition, I will be using the knowledge I have gained from my communication arts studies as well as outside research to answer the question: Is *Blackish* as progressive as critics claim?

Storytelling holds great power. It unlocks significance to make connections within society. In our society, the media holds this power to influence people's views on different matters. Throughout my research I will be discovering how the media influences people's view on race and class. In my research I will also work to make sense of how the media uses the American Dream to skew the ability to climb the class ladder as a minority. For this research I will heavily rely on the work of Herman Gray in his book *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* as well as the book *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* by Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis. These inquiries relate heavily to society because as people continue to bring media into their homes they are destined to take the underlying messages as well. The way to combat these messages is to stay informed about the injustices that the media continues to provide through falsified stories.

The central argument that I will make is, although *Blackish* is a new and seemingly progressive black sitcom because of the controversial language the characters use, there are still

cracks that showcase racial stigmas. To make this argument, I will review critics' arguments and claims. Many of the critics I have briefly reviewed over my time of research in determining what sitcom I would analyze, specifically claimed majorly that *Blackish* was the most progressive show since *The Cosby Show*. At times they have claimed that *Blackish* was even more progressive than *The Cosby Show*, which was at its time *the* progressive black sitcom being aired. I will then analyze specific episodes within *Blackish* that will be backed up from my research within my literary review to either agree or dispute the fact that the discourse surrounding *Blackish* should be considered progressive.

Lit Review

Entertainment is a substantial part of our everyday life, and television is one of our main go to's for entertainment. As a minority, I wanted to discuss the different levels in the way that television portrays black life. Here, I review some of the major factors that have influenced the scholarship on sitcom television, specifically, black sitcoms. In this section I will use two major works: *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* by Herman Gray and *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* by Sut Jhally & Justin Lewis. Herman Gray really dives deep into understanding how and who creates the image of blackness. With the help of Gray, I deconstruct the institutional production of blackness and how it has changed in sitcom history. Next, I engage in the use of the American Dream and how that covers class relations within our society. Jhally & Lewis allowed me to focus on how "the Cosby moment" changed the course of black television sitcoms. Another source I'll consider is *Class Dismissed*, which is a film created Jeremy Smith, Loretta Alper, Pepi Lesityna, and Sut Jhally to discuss the importance of power between the races, as well as how class is an essential part of television that structures our view of working, middle, and upper-class values. This power has created a social norm in television that continues to be followed by producers in order to create works that will fit within the (televisual) realities of our society. In this literature review I reveal key arguments that will ultimately improve my overall project in determining the progress that black television has seen in recent years.

Defining Blackness

Television has played an important role in the lives of every viewer. We, as a society, look to television --mainly when it comes to sitcoms-- to show us the perfect life, a life that we strive for and fantasize about. Society, and especially African Americans have to ask themselves who defines blackness? We have to ask this question to understand how the media industry has constructed the definition of being black. Gray explains that African Americans have debated "the shape, character, and terms of blackness" (Gray 37). Instead of assuming the cultural and political works of blackness, we need to critically interrogate why and how the notion of popular black culture has been created despite black reality.

As Gray argues in his book, for decades, the television industry has played an important role in defining blackness while also keeping the values of American society intact. Many viewers only look at the surface aspects of television: Are there black characters in the movie? Are they being treated fairly? Did they die first or in the middle in horror movies? These are surface level arguments for greater representation of black Americans in television.

After *The Cosby Show* aired, with respect to sitcoms, "every television season since the show first appeared in the mid-1980's has included a family that black folk could call their own"(Gray xxii). These shows, such as *My Wife and Kids, The Bernie Mac Show, and the Parkers,* update black family lives and give a new variation of family and comedy to its viewers that still has a universal place of familiarity and similarity for everyone. However, In 2003 the NAACP conducted a study about the roles of how minorities are represented on television. The "positive" portrayals of blacks and other minorities were deemed as poor representations and seen as the dismissal state of minority representation (Gray xxi). Although the distribution of blacks in television were improved by showing them in character roles such as judges, lawyers,

detectives and more, the nature of insults towards the black community were staying at the same level rather than getting better for African Americans (Gray xxi). In Gray's investigation television and race show how the meaning of on screen blackness has changed.

I ask myself, why is *The Cosby Show* an important text to study when it comes to representations of African Americans on television? *The Cosby Show* changed history by presenting black American life in a positive light, while also ignoring history, the struggles of racial barriers, poverty, and overall acceptance that black Americans continue to try and push past. Despite ignoring this history, *The Cosby Show* allowed a turning point for African Americans on television. Now that black people are represented in the same class as white people they too were "normal". This is problematic because we don't actually see an advancement in television. *The Cosby Show*, while being a black sitcom does nothing more to advance the image of black people, it simply enhances it by showing a black family in a better class position. However, because they are being included in middle class scenarios "it is no longer racism that explains the life chances of blacks; it's their class position" (Jhally & Lewis 65). Racism has been thrown out the window because we see that black people have made it, on the screen at least. In this context it ignores the struggles that the majority of black Americans have had to face in society. Jhally and Lewis present that *The Cosby Show* states: once you get close to or achieve their class position all problems dealing with race will happen to disappear.

Commercial Television and Black Sitcoms

Television's way of trying to define blackness was, and still is, impossible to do without catering to non-black, majority white, audiences. It's hard to get a large enough audience to view

shows and keep them going without giving all viewers something they can relate too. That is the issue with television because, as Gray writes, “in order for television to achieve its work--that is, to make meaning and produce pleasure-- it has to draw upon and operate on the basis of a kind of generalized societal common sense about the terms of the society and people’s social location in it” (Gray 9). In particular, Gray says there are three discourses that structure the commercial network representations of blackness. Those discourses are assimilationist, pluralist, and multiculturalism. All of these different types of representations still incorporate the hegemonic social constructions of the United States, however they are played out in slightly different dynamics.

Assimilationist television discourses treat the social and political issues of black citizens as though they are individual problems. Shows that use an assimilationist approach eliminate or marginalize cultural differences in order to show a sense of universal similarity: “Assimilationist programs construct a United States where the historic and contemporary consequences of structured social inequality and a culture deeply inflicted and defined by racism are invisible and inconsequential to the lives of its citizens” (Gray 86). This is the harshest way of supporting the hegemonic attitudes towards whiteness because there is no way to criticize it. In this context hegemonic attitudes act as the dominant understanding of society determining how the dominant race is to be seen against all other minority races. The majority of black citizens were not middle class Americans, not to say that the majority of white citizens were, however, television shows just played into the view that white Americans would never move from their dominant televisual middle class position. This may have been the harshest way of looking at color through the eyes of the television industry because there was no room for acceptance of any celebrations of

different cultural backgrounds. Although this may be true, the pluralist view was not much better.

The pluralist discourse is the separate, but equal view. This discourse is to situate black characters in domestically centered black worlds and circumstances that are essentially parallel to those of whites on television. This way it is possible to celebrate different cultures without disrupting the dominant views and narratives of American society. Gray points out that the construction of whiteness is privileged therefore "whiteness is the privileged yet unnamed place from which to see and make sense of the world. This very transparency contributes to the hegemonic status of this televisual construction of whiteness, placing it beyond critical interrogation" (Gray 86). What makes shows such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and *Sanford & Son* pluralist shows, rather than assimilationist ones? According to Gray, it is the fact that blackness is not hidden. These predominantly black shows are still able to be viewed by a wide range of audiences due to the fact that these black characters are upper middle class, living in the nice part of Los Angeles. Even when you mix in some diversity into the television show, blackness must still be backed up by some kind of class to show that black people are just like "normal" people, or in other words white people. By giving a minority group a sense of class, it shows that they can be valued despite their race, due to the fact that they have achieved power and recognition through material items and values.

Multiculturalism appeals to the universal themes of mobility and individualism of black culture; as Gray says, "this discursive space positions viewers, regardless of race, class, or gender locations, to participate in black experiences from multiple subject positions" (Gray 90). This discourse allows viewers to experience shows that position us to understand what it's like to

live in America through the eyes of an African American. *Frank's Place,* examined everyday life from the perspective of working-class and middle-class blacks. It tried as much as possible to not be seen through the eyes of white middle-class audiences. Multiculturalism actually celebrates the individuality of black culture while not having to apologize for being black.

The main argument that Gray is trying to make is that there is a complex interplay between the representations we see on television and the institutional dimensions of commercial television. Television may not reflect the best perception of minorities, however due to their class position it creates an image that pleases the eye of the viewer. At this time in the late 1940's and the 1950's especially, the societal view of television was skewed towards middle-class white citizens, and honestly any white citizen striving for that American Dream if they hadn't already achieved it. In this way the hegemonic societal norm is the class position that these characters represent which grants them acceptance on the screen and creates an image that pleases the audience. By this I mean TV tends to reinforce dominant ideologies about race and class, meaning, industries place images that subconsciously reinforce hegemonic attitudes for audiences. Gray explains it by saying " these shows are also tethered to this hegemonic white middle-class universe in yet another way-- through the conventional formulas, generes, codes, and practices that structure their representations" (Gray 88). This made it easy for television industries to cater towards that lens and forget to incorporate any minorities that were also working towards the American Dream.

In the 1980's however, there was a shift in audience. Representations of blackness only began to proliferate when total viewers of the big three networks ABC, NBC, and CBS started to decline. The institutional production of blackness was ultimately for audiences. When those three

channels had the eyes of white Americans, they made them feel safe and secure by offering images of black Americans in the middle class also going through the same issues as white characters dealt with on television.

Then, as paid programming came out and cable television had declined there had to be a switch. Black viewers watch nearly 40% more television than the rest of the population (Lewis). Black audiences were mostly concentrated in urban areas where network owned and operated stations were located and the networks were competitive with cable outlets. This is the cause for the TV industry to finally have to woo black audiences. In 1986 it seemed as if every aspect of television was being marketed toward the black audiences. These television shows still perpetuated stereotypical images that black individuals faced, however there was a boom of black sitcoms. This is what made the black audience feel as if they were being valued because they were being seen where, historically, they were invisible.

There is a struggle to talk about the multiple logics that go into unraveling the representation of black life in America. Approaching TV in terms of those multiple logics, social contexts, and contradictions is a way of keeping black people in the game as pawns of the industry's image construction (Gray). I think here, Gray is saying that the more we see TV as the representation for images of minorities (primarily black people for this instance) we allow TV to reinforce those stereotypes. As long as television keeps on showing black people in this light it will be a struggle to change the mindsets of the ones who tune in to these very programs. People don't think to view television as a large supporter of this issue, but those are the stories that are being spread about black people. After a while of hearing the same stories over and over again it's hard to accept any other story as true.

The Cosby Moment

Stereotypical images of black Americans would not be the only images in television history. Black culture was systematically berated through the lense of television showing a very one-sided view of black Americans. For example Gray explains that " television programs involving blacks in the 1970's were largely representations of what white liberal middle-class television program makers assumed (or projected) were 'authentic' accounts of poor black urban ghetto experiences" (Gray 77). These representations were seen in shows such as *Sanford and Son, What's Happening!!,* and *Good Times. The Cosby Show* was a pivotal series that changed the history of black television. However, this section is not to praise *The Cosby Show.* Here I will be exposing the downfalls that *The Cosby Show* has created in the black television industry as well as situating *The Cosby Show* within one of the following discourses: Assimilationist, Pluralist, Multiculturalism.

At first glance, *The Cosby Show* has done amazing work in reflecting the increasing diversity of African Americans, symbolizing the continuous upward social mobility of blacks (Jhally & Lewis). However, *The Cosby Show* has its downfalls, and overall, through a liberal lens it is a big step backwards in the upward mobility for social acceptance within the black community in real life (Jhally & Lewis). The *Cosby Show* was about an upper middle class all black family, the Huxtables, living in a Brownstone house of New York City. Cliff Huxtable is an obstetrician and his wife Claire Huxtable is a lawyer with their daughters Sondra, Denise, Vanessa and Rudy, and son Theo. This black sitcom depicts normal everyday life in comparison to white sitcoms and what those families deal with in the context of the show. A life that people want to relate too, and want to have. On screen the Huxtables family looks so appealing to be

like, plus, the show doesn't put race at the forefront, just family struggles. The viewers watching *The Cosby Show* may not be on the same class level as the Huxtables, however they still experience the same family dynamics as the Huxtables. What may draw the audience into *The Cosby Show* is the notion families with wealth still have issues that any family goes through.

Although this sitcom was a comedy like many other sitcoms, it didn't ostracize black humor as other black sitcoms did such as *Amos n' Andy* and *Fraiser*. *The Cosby Show* developed a different style that created a reasonable sense of comedy rather than a ridiculous one (Jhally & Lewis 23). It was a show that offered an actual shift in the representation of black lives on television that occurred due to a push for more "positive" images of minorities (Jhally & Lewis). When viewers think of positive images, these images are based upon one's social class. An upper social class limits one's experiences of struggles, crime and mischief. However, "by accepting the conditions of 'positive' images means accepting terms of an ideological system which systematically disavows the realities and effects of class structure" (Jhally & Lewis 122). Jhally and Lewis explicitly tell their readers that class is above all the most important concept in the world of television. The 'positivity' of the images being discussed are related to class. Upper middle class is seen as much more positive and happy than working class images. Higher classes are associated with healthy function, cleanliness, and education while working class members are seen as less functional, dirty, and less educated. However, once minorities are deemed exceptional through class, the system wins because viewers forget about realities that continue to hold minorities back from achieving true success. *The Cosby Show* did not follow the established pattern of representing blacks on television. The Huxtables were not working class, therefore they played by the rules and didn't create mischief for themselves. The Huxtables also spoke

well, if a viewer had closed their eyes they would not be able to tell if a white or black person was speaking which is unlike other black sitcoms with characters who have a distinct dialect attached to them. *The Cosby Show* didn't just break barriers by changing the humor and sophistication of black sitcoms, it broke racial stereotyping barriers. Here we have a family that is presumably presented as white due to their high class and well spoken english, but the audience can see that they are black due to the color of their skin (Jhally & Lewis). By presenting these black characters in a different light, rather than the typical demining and stereotypical images of black characters, and showing them in the typical upper middle class environment it was popular in both the white and black community of viewers. As Jhally and Lewis say, the upper middle class is " relatable because it's familiar; it meets the expectations of the TV audience" (Jhally & Lewis 37). However, by creating this view of black life it presented a misleadingly cozy picture, a sugar candy world unhampered by racism, crime, and economic deprivation that the majority of black citizens live with.

The Cosby Show plays a conjuring trick, according to Jhally and Lewis: " they are an upper middle class professional family however, within the middle class world of television the Huxtables are no longer privileged, but normal a 'basic regular family'" (Jhally & Lewis 25). The belief that the Huxtable family is "just like a real family" meaning an upper-middle class family, was one of the most powerful themes running through the focus group in the study that Jhally and Lewis conducted. When white Americans accepted the Huxtable family into their homes they disregarded and excluded the stereotypical lifestyles and behaviors of black Americans on television who were less privileged than the Huxtables. The Huxtables gave viewers an emotional connection from their family to the viewers families because they offered

similarities to different audiences. By excluding the stereotypical images previously seen in less affluent families, the Huxtables transformed themselves into a family accepted in a world that praised their behavior. It is as if the goal of *The Cosby Show* was to give both black and white audiences a different image of black culture that could be respected. To do this there was little to no allowance of the discourse of discrimination. As Jhally and Lewis write: "In an age when most white people have moved beyond the crudities of overt and naked racism, there is a heavy burden of guilt for all concerned. *The Cosby Show* provides its white audience with relief not only from fear, but also from responsibility" (Jhally & Lewis 8). Without the discussion of racism it encourages the audience to see the real world through rose tinted glasses.

By looking at *The Cosby Show* through a liberal lens rather than just praising it for its superficial context that changes the direction of how black Americans are viewed, we can see that it fits within what Gray calls the Pluralist discourse. The Huxtable family is living an upper middle class lifestyle centered in a black world. With black characters who have names that fit black people, whose children attend black colleges and listen to black artists. Audiences can see that these are black people, but accept them because their circumstances parallel those of white sitcoms. Culturally, *The Cosby Show* pretends to celebrate black culture by adding small details to insinuate they are slightly different from the average white sitcom. Such as black art on the wall, listening to black musicians, and sending their children to historically black colleges. As Jhally and Lewis state: "Although *The Cosby Show* is no longer exceptional in its non stereotypical portrayal of African Americans, it has shifted the TV world in which blacks, and, moreover, realistic blacks can be members of the upper middle class society" (Jhally & Lewis

31). This concept brings me to discuss the American Dream because of the mindset that television industries have harped on which is success equals acceptance.

American Dream

What is the American Dream? The American Dream is the belief system that anybody no matter their class or race can attain their own success in a society where upward mobility is attainable for everyone. This Dream comes to an individual through hard work and risk taking rather than by chance. American television has helped to instill this Dream in order to protect its racially biased history while also protecting us from recognizing class divisions. As Jhally and Lewis write: “The United States is a country that is still emerging from a deeply racist history, a society in which many white people have treated (and continue to treat) black people with contempt, suspicion, and a profoundly ignorant sense of superiority” (Jhally & Lewis 2). The way the television industry has kept these images instilled in the lives of Americans, specifically, black Americans, is by providing them with role models to continue the notion that anybody can succeed in a society where class is more or less irrelevant. In doing so, industries continue to prove the inferiority of the general minority group that has not attained this success standard (Jhally & Lewis). When class is presented as irrelevant for climbing society's class ladder, there are no excuses allowed for why the impoverished are still in their class position.

Although *The Cosby Show* created a change of direction in the way black Americans were viewed, it also symbolizes the fairness of the American Dream that was and continues to be a fallacy (Jhally & Lewis). Jhally and Lewis explain the American Dream within the realities of its construction: “The American Dream is insidious, not innocent. It is part of a belief system that allows people in the United States to disregard the inequalities that generate the nation's

appealing recordon of poverty, crime, health, homelesness, and education" (Jhally & Lewis 139). Television is that area of entertainment that caters to our desires. Pre Cosby era the American Dream as seen on television was not attainable for all races. Post Cosby era not only changed the views of white Americans, it also skewed the idea of the American Dream for black Americans. This show is seen as inspirational, it glorifies black Americans at the top.

The positive images that *The Cosby Show* gives the audience can be counterproductive because they reinforce the myth of the American Dream, a just world where anyone can make it and racial barriers no longer exist (Jhally & Lewis). Television producers have this power to skew the audience by showing them positive images of minorities influencing our view of the world without taking any responsibility for it. Giving light to minorities who have risen to the top nourishes the American Dream. The solid class system of the American Dream allows for cracks in the system without threatening its survival (Jhally & Lewis). These cracks, also explained as allowances for minorities to experience a leap of social mobility, may be the only thing keeping the American Dream alive. The Huxtables assures us that in the United States everyone regardless of race or class can have material success close to or equal to them. The cracks within the system allow people to continue to be convinced that the system they live by is fundamentally fair (Jhally & Lewis).

Television is a perfect tool for a non threatening entrance to the American Dream. The messages created through television are a part of our environment, and now that television is found everywhere and consumed automatically and unconsciously it becomes ingrained into our subconscious beliefs. "To understand prime time television then is to understand an important part of the way we view the world and ourselves" (Jhally & Lewis 18). Americans look up to

television in order to review their own lives and take note about how to better themselves in pursuit of the American Dream. Television promises that if you attain x,y, and z commercial products you will achieve the American Dream everyone strives for (Class Dismissed).

Cliff Huxtable is easily assimilated into this ideology of the American Dream, a black man who has achieved success beyond the constraints of a racially defined culture, who has consumer products and can afford to buy what his family needs or wants. *The Cosby Show* is a new and subtle form of racism; an enlightened racism through proving that black Americans can succeed. Yet, in doing so, the Huxtables have also proved that black Americans who have not reached close to their success level have failed. As mentioned above, enlightened racism is very subtle. Racism has not just disappeared. Today, as Jhally and Lewis explain, it " clothes itself more respectably, allowing a deep-rooted racism to appear to be open-mindedly liberal" (Jhally & Lewis 96). With this explanation, it shows how *The Cosby Show* has created even more of a connection (or divide) between race and class. By only focusing on accepting race based upon one's class position which creates a divide between the haves: people with money who are situated in the middle class or above, and the have nots: working class citizens still struggling day to day. When viewers see the Huxtable's in the category of the "haves" it creates a disregard for the have-nots who still deserve recognition.

The American Dream is concerning because it is built on the notion that class is dismissed, and it does a great job enforcing this idea into American belief systems. Blacks and other marginalized groups would have to play by television rules. Prime time with African Americans suggests there is no need for distribution of wealth because there was plenty of room for everyone on television (Class Dismissed). This system may not be so problematic if it was

fair in acknowledging racial issues. *The Cosby Show* allows class to be the main factor of acceptance for black Americans to enter white American households. It disregards the working class completely leaving them to fend for themselves in an unjust system supported by the television industry. Yet, without bringing class into the discussion we cannot understand why it is the leading factor of commonality between the races.

Class seems to be as important as race in some situations. “To understand racial inequalities in the United States, we need to understand how those inequalities are rooted in a class system” (Jhally & Lewis 86). The American Dream draws us away from thinking about the class system, however the notion of class proves to be the factor that causes inequalities. Inequalities have been rooted in our class because minorities never had the upper hand when it came to money and sophistication. Minorities were not able to climb the class ladder due to laws instilled to keep them in the working class. Once those laws were dismantled, new forms of strategy were used to keep the mindsets of minorities in their working class position. (The Corporation). Television is written in respect to the American Dream which complicates our understanding of the presentation of race and class from the reality of it. As Jhally and Lewis state “we have two worlds: one grounded in social reality, where social injustice is rife; one rooted in television fiction, where social and economic prosperity abound without division or discrimination” (Jhally & Lewis 87). Lewis and Jhally see that the majority of Americans are split between these two worlds, it doesn't depend solely on race, especially because “not all sectors of the black population are suffering in the same way” (Jhally & Lewis 67). Television allows its audience to watch blindly as industries put up a front for an equal America.

To continue the success of the American Dream, television industries decided that they needed to move away from race-based explanations and turn towards class-based explanations (Jhally & Lewis). With the visibility of class there is an allowance of racist explinations of black Americans in poor economic standings. Sitcoms are mostly always set in an upper middle class setting, allowing class to almost be invisible because sitcoms are one in the same. Yet, in reality, class is the ultimate factor in deciding who is valued and who is not. So when they are set in a working class background paired with a black family assumptions are made that black families will stay in that lower class status. Now, with a better understanding of how black images are constructed, the connection between TV and the American Dream, and how class hides racial barriers, I can now situate *Blackish* within these contexts.

Background

For this analysis I will be looking into a new American television show created by Kenya Barris called *Blackish*. However, to better understand this analysis an introduction to *Blackish* is vital. It premiered on September 24th, 2014 and has continued to run for six seasons on ABC network. This show follows an upper middle class black family led by Andre 'Dre' Johnson and Rainbow Johnson raising their four children Zoey Johnson, Andre Johnson, Jr., Jack Johnson, and Diane Johnson in Hollywood. This show revolves around family life and what they have to juggle on a day to day basis as well as personal and sociopolitical issues. *Blackish* has received Emmy and Golden Globe nominations for Outstanding Comedy Series and a TCA Award for Outstanding Achievement in Comedy. On top of all of these awards Tracee Ellis Ross the actress that plays Mrs. Johnson won the Golden Globe Award for Best Actress. This show has received a lot of praise and ranks high in terms of ratings in the United States (Kondolojy).

Background of the show

Mr. Johnson also referred to as Dre, grew up in the hood with his father, who still lives with him to this day. He promised his parents he would go to school and get an education to move his family out of the hood, as he puts it it was "the perfect American Dream story" (Blackish- trailer). Dre works as an advertising executive at Stevens and Lido and his wife, Rainbow works as an anesthesiologist. Dre has achieved a new social class and has built a family around those standards. However, Dre gets worried that his family has started to lose their roots and culture living in a predominantly white area.

This series is loosely based on the producers' own life. Kenya Barris said "I decided to do this project when I looked up and realized that everywhere I go I'm constantly the fly in

buttermilk" (Andreeva). Barris then moves on to explaining it like "I'm usually THE black guy at work. We're THE black family in the neighborhood. My kids are basically THE black kids at school. I think it's kind of a situation of being careful of what you wish for. It's almost in like *Moving on Up*, I've sort of priced myself 'out' of being black." (Andreeva). Mr. Barris no longer wanted to be the 'only' black person in the office. He must have felt as if his roots were too falling away from him and his family, as the show struggles with this topic. In an interview, Kenya Barris did not believe that it would even get to season four due to how much controversy *Blackish* entails. The president has tweeted about it in disgust. Kenya barris says political correctness has made everyone repress, but families are talking about these conversations, however they are struggling to do so because they didn't think they could talk about it or know how to. *Blackish* is full of comedy, and comedy gives these harsh topics a spoonful of sugar to take them in. Mr. Barris states that he hopefully is giving people hope, telling people that there are others out there that think like you too.

In an interview on *The Daily Show* Trevor Noah had the opportunity to speak with Kenya Barris to get an inside scoop on what Barris is trying to accomplish with the production of *Blackish.* Trevor Noah begins by asking Barris if he thought that *Blackish* would last as long as it has. Barris states that he had no idea it would come so far, but that he is glad that it has. The topics that Barris and his crew put on television are the topics that make you think "oh should this go on television?" He explains that if those thoughts don't come across their minds then they shouldn't be on the show. Barris then goes on to explain that political correctness has made Americans feel like everything is ok when it is clearly not. By forgetting about political correctness it has opened up communication between families, friends, and between races. He is

trying to implement the idea that we as people are more alike than we are made out to be through the media. (Comedy Central).

About the Network ABC

Now, to align *Blackish* with its TV network I have gone to the ABC Network website in search of who they are and what they represent. ABC has had a long history of changing their platform for more inclusive programming directed towards teenagers and young adults. In August of 2006 ABC Family shifted towards this dual audience by having teenagers and young adults being their primary target demographic. This included the slogan "A New Kind of Family. Later down the line in 2015 ABC Family was bought by Walt Disney which came with another announcement that their network would be renamed Freeform. As of January 18, 2018. Freeform announced a new slogan "A Little Forward ". This slogan works to reflect the networks programming towards more modern series. Series that are inclusive to different demographics within young teens and adults. For instance I remember watching *The Fosters*, an upper middle class lesbian couple who raises foster children to eventually adopt them. Another series that stuck out to me was *Switched at Birth*. This series involved two families, one wealthy and one working class, whose children experience deafness. (Kondolojy).

As I click onto ABC network's website and read the "about" section, their slogan is stated as, "at the heart of our citizenship identity is a business commitment to unify all of our prosocial initiatives under a single idea: inspiring individuals and communities to create the culture they imagine ("ABC Home Page). With this slogan as well as all other inclusive slogans that ABC network has embraced, *Blackish* fits into their program identity. *Blackish* embraces the

inspiration of individuals trying to create a culture where there is open dialogue about societal issues. *Blackish* is also a family based sitcom which ABC embraces with open arms, which makes sense because ABC is known for their family dynamic shows.

After Walt Disney purchased the ABC Family network, they renamed it Freeform. I think this is significant because *Blackish* represents the ability to speak freely within programs. The topics that are discussed within the program are not usually aired on live television, especially television meant for families to view. Freeform's new way of looking at television is about breaking stereotypes on and off the screen. Through understanding the origins of *Blackish* I will be able to better analyze it to make sense of it progressive nature.

The SLUMPY viewer

In the article "Prime-Time in the Gay 90's" written by Ron Becker, he discusses the importance of audiences and the power that networks have in controlling images. The TV audience does not simply exist for network executives to find, there are tools such as ratings and marketing research that is produced to create a grasp on the understanding of the audiences values. As an audience we have to think of ourselves as a commodity. In the 1990's the commodity audience that networks focused on was updated. Shows were more focused towards the upscale viewer, a more urban demographic, as well as the working woman, thus presenting the SLUMPY viewer. SLUMPY stands for socially liberal, urban-minded, professionals. This new audience excluded for this niche of marketing were conservatives as well as poor working class minorities.

As this new audience came to rise, networks also began to shift their programming strategy. As NBC abandoned the "family hour" strategy ABC followed suit. Networks went after hip young and urban 18-49 year olds. Networks looked to place more "edgy" programming in their schedules. For example networks began to incorporate gay/lesbian material because it fit in with the SLUMPY viewer. The first four decades of TV programming denied the existence of homosexuality. So when the LGBTQ community was portrayed on TV it was celebrated. However, networks were able to mainstream gays as urban, upscale, and white citizens, all being stereotypes. These "sophisticated" shows featuring gays hide the true struggles many LGBTQ members go through. "While appearing to have clout it can translate to real political progress which does not equate to economic power" (Becker 44). Thus, economic oppression for gays of different demographics than those seen on TV was even more erased.

When I situate *Blackish* and black characters in the same context as shows that include gay and lesbian characters, I see the same complications. *Blackish* was created for the SLUMPY viewer as well. ABC also protects its 'edgy' brand identity due to how characters explicitly speak on social issues. It seems very powerful to be able to talk about these issues on television, and actually have them be accepted topics in homes around the world however, this is perceived power once again. *Blackish* as a program has tried to give black people power through television which again, just doesn't equate to actual power in real life situations.

Analysis: How do Critics see *Blackish?*

Recently, America has been on a quest to become colorblind as a new form of acceptance towards all races (McNamara). *Blackish* is a long waited sitcom that looks to take on debates about racial identity, what better way to take this task on than introduce it through a familiar construct? Thirty years ago there were black sitcoms such as *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* where the audience could see affluent black families living the American Dream, however these characters just happened to be black. As The LA Times article "ABC's 'black-ish' gamely takes on racial identity" written by Mary McNamara states, " As its title implies, Kenya Barris' "black-ish," premiering Wednesday on ABC, will not be pussyfooting around political correctness" (McNamara). To grasp exactly what political correctness is I have pulled the definition which is, "the avoidance, often considered as taken to extremes, of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against " ("Dictionary by Merriam-Webster"). Through *Blackish's* attempt to combat political correctness by presenting the Johnson family in a positive upper middle class status, it implies that the groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against can't provide the positive images of a minority group that an advantaged person could. As Jhally and Sut explain " To look good, to look 'positive,' means accepting a value system in which upper middle class status is a sign of superiority. This is more than crude materialism; for a group that has been largely excluded from these higher socioeconomic echelons, it is culutral and political suicide" (Jhally & Lewis 122). By accepting the conditions of positive images we are accepting the terms of an ideological system that denies the realities and consequences of class structure.

The directness of the show is refreshing, however does this make it progressive? Progressive means that either a person or a happening is advocating or implementing social reform, or new liberal ideas. Critics like Jonathan P. Higgins from The Root are happy to have a show dealing with real day to day black issues. Higgins reveals that "*Blackish* is the show that black people have been waiting for and needing for a very long time" (Higgins). Higgins claims that he is happy to see a TV show that paints the black family in a not so perfect fashion while staying true to the idea that an American family can, in fact, be black. I would disagree with this notion that *Blackish* paints this family in a not so perfect fashion. *Blackish* seems to struggle with staying true to being "black" while living in an upper middle class lifestyle but at the end of every episode enlightenment is bestowed upon the Johnson family and they are able to continue living in their cushy life. Another critic, Inkoo Kang, makes note that *Blackish's* debut opened up a new era of identity-based-sitcoms. These new sitcoms such as *Mixedish, Grownish,* and *Fresh off the Boat* seem to exemplify and engage rigorously the demand for inclusivity (Kang). This may be true however, there is something in common with all of these new up and coming sitcoms which is their class position. The progressiveness of speech in *Blackish* as well as similar sitcoms may be coming along, yet I find it hard to see progressiveness when it comes to class positions and minorities.

Blackish: What is it about? Keeping it Real

In addressing the question, does *Blackish* embody the progressive view that critics have claimed? I have chosen to analyze three episodes. The three episodes are the "Pilot" episode, "Hope", as well as the "Elephant in the Room". Within these three episodes I will be trying to

decipher what *Blackish* chooses to focus on, how they attempt to represent different social and political topics concerning race, and if they succeed in doing so. Another aspect that I will be focusing on is the difference between *The Cosby Show* and *Blackish*, both shows that have changed history within the TV industry, but also offer very different viewer experiences.

Audiences have not seen many, if any sitcoms do what *Blackish* has accomplished in the TV industry. *Blackish* is not just about any regular black family living their lives in a suburban neighborhood trying to raise their kids. This show does work to bring light to social and political issues that they encounter on a daily basis as well as family struggles that come into the mix. Many times those social and political issues are embedded in their family struggles of trying to hold onto their "blackness." Blackness seems to have been recreated through a white lense. By this I mean that aspects of black life have been recreated through white words to resemble something more colorblind, by using the word *urban* instead of *inner city* or *black*. As the lead character in the show, Dre, explains, "Justin Timberlake has won the soul train award, Kim Kardashian is the symbol for big butts, and Asian guys are nice on the dance floor. Big butts, Soul, and dancing were black people's go to". (Barris). While the world has changed around Dre, so has he, yet he is struggling to find himself in this new light of upper class life.

In the first episode of *Blackish,* the theme is all about "keeping it real." Keeping it real means keeping it "black," "hood" even. "Keeping it real" means not being fake or influenced by your surroundings. According to Urban Dictionary, being true to yourself and your values, but more importantly, being true to innate values that all people acknowledge as respectable, especially not following dominant values that should not be acceptable. Keeping it real in this sense would mean staying true to your "black self" even when living in a mostly "white"

neighborhood. I think it is important to note that *Blackish* is about reclaiming "black culture" in the Johnsons family, however there are controversial issues when it comes to breaking down barriers for black people who maybe want to venture out of the "norm" when it comes to sports, music, and beliefs. However, given what I have learned in my studies of communication arts, authenticity is more about what is inside of yourself rather than the culture of our environment. Dre is looking for something inside of himself because he feels that he has been corrupted by the ability to buy material items that has risen him out of one social class and into the next. For example, I will lay out a few scenarios within these episodes that I found as a cause for concern in being authentic.

Following these first few scenes in the Pilot episode, Andre Jr. tells his dad that he and his boys are joining the field hockey team. Dre is distraught, ranting on and on about how field hockey is not a sport that black people play much less black men. Dre spends time dealing with this heartbreak of a son not continuing the legacy of playing basketball in highschool, yet his heartbreak comes to an end when Andre Jr. reveals that he is just trying to get in with the jocks, and be accepted enough to play basketball. I find this problematic because I feel like there is an underlying message of trying to fit into a different background to be accepted. Especially considering that the Johnson children attend private school which is largely dominated by a white demographic of students. Not to say that all white children go to private schools, however Dre needs to realize that in sending his kids to a wealthy private school, they will be introduced to higher class sporting options.

Another scenario featuring Andre Jr., deals with the act of joining the Rebublican debate club. As the *Blackish* points out, the black community is notoriously known for being

Democratic. Dre even states “black people aren’t Republicans, it's not just an Obama thing”. When Dre comes to his wife Rainbow about the news, it takes her a good twenty minutes to come to terms with the information she has just been presented because she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Another heartbreaking decision made by a Johnson child is overlooked for a short time when the truth about Andre Jr.’s action comes out. He only joined the club because he had a crush on the President of the Republican debate club. Dre, proud of his son is all for it, not worried at all anymore because his son doesn’t actually have those views. On the other hand Rainbow is still very worried, mentioning the fact that women have an intense power over men to conform to their lifestyles and ideals. Take Dre for example, he would never be eating seaweed snacks if it wasn’t for Rainbow, “they are gross!” she exclaims. Again, in this situation the characters in *Blackish* might be too quick to speak for all of the black community and how this community should think and behave. “Some critics find flaws in the way that Dre tries to force his family to act a certain way. He wants his family to be a sort of ‘token black family’” (Ehigiator & Pye). That is a lot of what the show is about, trying to remove the *ish* from *Black* by finding what counts as black and what doesn't. This is problematic because just as not every being from the black community lives as lavishly as the Johnsons family, they don't think in the same way either. However, *Blackish* does an impeccable job of explaining both sides of the issue. I think the views are definitely more progressive in the finished product of explaining political issues, but there is an allowance for dialogue of the conservative view. For example Dre goes straight to claiming all Republicans are racist, and Rainbow comes back at him claiming that they are not. The comedic relief then comes into play as there is a sidebar with Dre reclaiming that in fact “yes all Republicans are racist”. These statements to be made on national

television are pretty bold, coming from a black family sitcom, and in this way *Blackish* has surpassed *The Cosby Show's* progressive nature. America is situated in a conservative lense, and by opening up dialogue between Republicans and Democrats within the show, it comes as a shock because we haven't seen these types of discussions in previous black sitcoms.

Lastly, the next example I will continue with is the concept of acceptance in an upper class neighborhood and fitting in amongst the rich while being the only black family in the neighborhood. This example is not set in one of the three episodes I chose to analyze, however I thought it important to discuss. Dre learns through a dinner trip to a cheap buffet that his kids are spoiled and need to be taught a lesson. Even though Dre has made it in America and now can afford lots of materialistic things, he feels the need to remind his children that not everything comes so easily, he states "by giving them less, we are giving them more". Yet, a problem arises when the neighbors come knocking at the door with a casserole in hand because the two young twins of the family went and begged them for food. Rainbow is distraught reminding Dre that they are the only black people in the neighborhood and now because of the kids everyone is going to think that they are beggars. This episode also draws on some backhanded racist comments when the neighbors who bring the casserole over emphasize that "this would be a lot of house for anybody". Here, we can see again how race and class go together. Ideology and television tell us that being black equals being poor. Although that is an ideological view of television, the premise of *Blackish* is that they *are* out of place in a rich setting. "This not only misleads viewers into a benign view of the class system, it distorts the whole debate about how African Americans should be represented on television" (Jhally & Lewis 83). However, even though this black family is "overcoming" stereotypes, Blackish does its job to reinforce the

ideology that being black equals being poor by reminding its audience that this family is "Mysterious and Mythical" and out of their natural habitat, yet still thriving. As the lady who passes them in a Hollywood Tour bus specifically says, "quote". To return back to the scene, the audience can see the utter shock and confusion as to the words that just came out of this neighbors mouth which causes Rainbow to strike back, and make it known that the Johnson family brings in more than enough money. However, while the lesson is being taught to the children that they need to earn their money. A lesson that inherently is put in place to "divert attention from the class-based causes of racial inequality" (Jhally & Lewis 129). The Johnsons, an American Dream success story hides the racial inequalities that the black community struggles with. The audience can especially be reminded that they are not of the same class level as the Johnsons while Rainbow works hard trying to convince the neighbors that they are financially stable. She does this by dressing up in fancy clothes, showing off her nice jewelry, and even test driving a very expensive sports car just to flaunt in front of her neighbors. Jhally and Lewis would explain Rainbows behavior to be a product of blackness being a signifier for cultural conditions that have created black poverty. Rainbow has worked too hard to be seen as a product of her race, she has worked hard to liberate herself from the cultural condition of inferiority (Jhally & Lewis 97-99). "In the absence of a class analysis, the answer is to see most black people as culturally inferior" (Jhally & Lewis 97). Unfortunately there is not an absence of class in *Blackish*. The Johnson family makes it apparent that they are well off from the beginning. With the presence of class she can upgrade herself out of the condition of inferiority, by fitting in with the appearance of sophistication.

The difficulties of fitting in, in an upper class world dominated by white people is tough when it comes to holding onto your roots, as it proves for Dre. As Jhally and Lewis explain, the "idea of adopting upper-middle class norms displaced by the notion of becoming 'like white people'" (Jhally & Lewis 83). This is something that Kenya Barris discussed in the interview I mentioned in my background chapter, the struggle of class differences becoming racial differences. Being the fly in the buttermilk. Dre, holding onto his "ghetto" roots and ways of living is how he copes with rising to the top. Dre seems to be lost in his path as an upper class black man, while his family has fallen into line and accepted that they have to give parts of themselves up. However, these parts they are giving up weren't there in the first place like Dre's were. As Dre repeatedly states: his wife is of mixed race, therefore she wasn't raised as a traditional black child, and their children were born into this upper class lifestyle.

The Cosby Show vs Blackish

The Cosby Show, as previously mentioned, was a turning point in black television even if it no longer is seen as progressive. For its time it was *the* progressive show in the television industry. However, times have changed, and the progressive audience expects something with a bang. Opinions and ideas that are not conventionally aired on television. I would argue that *Blackish* embodies progressive aspects, such as introducing a new way to discuss social and political topics by not trying to be politically correct, however *Blackish* still holds tight to the standard sitcom template, which I would argue is the upper middle class family who takes on new family issues every day.

In the journal article "The Social Construction of the African American Family on Broadcast Television: A Comparative Analysis of *The Cosby Show* and *Blackish "*, *written* by David Stamps reveals similarities as well as differences between the two shows. *The Cosby Show* and *Blackish* are both primetime comedies that showcase a wealthy African American family consisting of a dual-parent household with multiple children. These shows reveal an atmosphere where African Americans are educated with full time careers at the same time as being actively involved in parenting their children. Both of these sitcoms combat negative stereotypes by presenting images that reinforce conventional family dynamics. The main idea for this is to present African American families who are seen on television in the same light as any non minority family. It is interesting to note that both of these series make an emphasis on the occupational statuses of each parent (Stamps). Having wealth at the forefront of these series is a considerably controversial issue due to the lack of wealth distributed over the black community as a whole. As Jhally and Lewis point out, the black reality is "permanent underclass, increasing poverty, drug addiction, crime, and joblessness" (Jhally & Lewis 62). Thirty years ago-- from the time that *Blackish* aired-- *The Cosby Show* "set the terms for 'positive' images of minorities: assimilation means adopting norms of dominant culture, which on TV means middle class" (Jhally & Lewis 57). When *Blackish* aired, Kenya Barris continued to feed into these positive images of a middle class black family, however he changed the playing field with the amount of controversial topics discussed on the show. *The Cosby Show* was criticized for not focusing enough on black issues, "critics, specifically African American, have condemned the show stating that it was not urban enough and was simply a way to put White Americans at ease about

racial issues because none ever exist on the show" (Stamps 413). *Blackish* made sure to mix this aspect of the positive black family up.

While *Blackish* deals heavily with family lessons, in almost every episode the writers find a way to integrate direct approaches to addressing race and social class. A significant scene featured in the episode "Elephant in the Room", Zoey, the oldest daughter states "Guys, have you ever noticed that we live in a really nice house."(Barris). Seeing as she just realized she needs glasses, it's easy for the audience to gloss over the fact that she just realized this. Being part of the audience, it is easy to see that they do live in a really nice house, but being blatantly stated like that makes the characters feel more real in realizing that they are of a higher class than their audience, specifically black audience, most likely is. Another topic of race and social class that *Blackish* addresses, is the discussion of interacial issues. Rainbow, the mother is a biracial woman while Dre is fully black. This in itself is an interesting addition to *Blackish* because we get to celebrate different backgrounds coming together to build a family. Within this context there are different issues discussed including "stereotypes such as the eating habits of African Americans compared to multiracial persons" (Stamps 415).

The episode that truly stuck out to me when talking about political issues and race was "Hope". In this episode the Johnson family discusses the issues of police brutality against black folk. In the introduction to the episode, images pass by of riots, explaining that experiences, conversations, and images we see have an effect on us. These images make us curious and bring up the question, what is going on in the world? This episode is where *Blackish* does an amazing job when speaking about a serious controversial issue. In this episode *Blackish* exposes different cases where black men have been systematically berated by the police and our justice system.

The Johnsons family gives the audience the facts of the case and while the grandpa (Pops) and Andre Jr. speak about how the kid may have not had a gun on him, but he did have a gun in the car, as well as driving over the speed limit, however being tased 37 times is a serious offense. In this episode, I think that *Blackish* offers both a conservative view for its audience as well as a liberal view by having Rainbow saying that they need to sit back and allow the system to do its job. However, the verdict of the indictment comes back and shocks the family stating that the grand jury has decided against the idea that there should be any criminal charges against the police officers. The reason for the episode being labeled hope, is because Dre feels as if there is no hope left in the justice system after time and time being failed by the system.

"Universal" claims of Blackish:

Blackish being the "new and improved" *Cosby Show*, is an excitement to the black community waiting on a show that offered what they had criticized in *The Cosby Show*. Although I do believe that *Blackish* represents the same ideologies of *The Cosby Show* in that these programs are trying to uplift and erase the negative images that other media have inflicted on the black community. There are issues within the dialogue that the characters use to ease the minds and ideas that seem to be universal claims of everyone in the black community being voiced by one man.

In my literary review, I discussed the issues with the American Dream allowing for cracks in the system to keep the Dream believable and achievable. Dre is that exception. Although there is a comedic sense to the beginning of the season when the Johsnon family is described as "Mythical and Majestic", the story line continues Dre's success at work as being the token black man to make it to the top. Dre states that being black in a workplace of few black

employees made him feel like they were all part of a little family, and when one member of that family made it, it was like they all made it. If this mindset stays the same then the American Dream continues to do its job by systematically allowing class to run the way people climb the class ladder. Here, *Blackish* is feeding into the idea that if we see a member from the black community rise up in class such as NFL or NBA players, actors and actresses, and select politicians, then in a sense the whole black community has made it and there is no need to continue the fight for equality. "Showing us stories of people who have made it from nothing hides structural barriers. We see countless examples of people making it, but few examples of people *prevented* from making it" (Jhally & Lewis 73). This imagined equality is just a facade, not actually backed up by any real movement for all people in the black community.

Dre even gets the chance to point out this fact. While in his business meeting waiting upon the arrival of the announcement for becoming the new Senior Vice President, he makes an allusion to how the meeting is set up. Diverse members on one side, and white members on the other side. Even making the distinction between Us and Them by the snacks provided, the diverse group (Us), getting cheetos and grape soda while the white side (Them), has a feast of coffee and breakfast delicacies.

Another claim that *Blackish* makes is allowing people of other races to be "honorary brothers", in that these select few chosen by black people have a special in. Dre points out that his assistant is woke, they have a handshake to prove it, however another co-worker is not woke, and definitely unintentionally racist. He has not been granted the acceptance of being an "honorary brother". I find this claim interesting because I have heard the notion of giving others a "black card", which is basically a pass to allow them to say certain things due to their

understanding of the black community's struggles. While this may be true for some select friend groups, it is not a universal behavior to allow other races a “black card” and should not be paraded as acceptable on national television.

Conclusion

This project was deeper than I thought it would be. Turns out, television can't be out of the box, it has to fit in. For centuries television has proven to be racist, classist, and sexist. However, people have changed, we are more accepting of our outer shell, but that doesn't mean that the core values of society have changed. I think that television exemplifies a lot of society's core values. I was trying to find out if *Blackish* was finally the show that gave a new look for television without fitting in to the centuries of television we already have.

Throughout my project, I have researched different factors that have influenced black sitcoms. With the guidance of Sut Jhally, Justin Lewis, and Herman Gray I have been able to understand how blackness is defined by the television industry. Given how Jhally and Lewis have researched *The Cosby Show*, *the* show that has changed the history of black sitcoms, while also being a conjuring trick, I have learned that the television industry has great influence to skew the minds of viewers. By providing people with an affluent image it can provide a show worth calling "positive". The television industry can redefine how we look at race and class, it can also continue the facade that all humans have the opportunity to live the American Dream. It hasn't always been the case to see minorities living within the walls of the American Dream on television. Many times they were working their way up, or settling with what they had.
Black television has not always been shown in the best light. There wasn't a black sitcom that black families could fully relate to, let alone all families. Then, *Blackish* arrived on screen. The "progressive" light brought to the screen changed the views of how all audiences saw black families. This is a program that is still invited into all homes no matter the race or class of the family viewing it. During my literary review I had come upon three discourses that structure the

commercial network representations of blackness. Those discourses are named assimilationist, pluralist, and multiculturalism. According to the definition that Gray gave me, I would situate *Blackish* around the multiculturalism discourse, actually celebrating the individuality of black culture while not having to apologize for being black. Yet, being in a multiculturalism discourse does not excuse the fact that the Johnson family promotes the ideals of the American Dream.

The American Dream, being the belief system that has been instilled into our everyday lives. More importantly, into the television industry in which American's consume on a daily basis. However, this "Dream" is only a myth, and unfortunately *The Cosby Show* as well as *Blackish* both reinforce this myth by instilling positive images that are considered to be counterproductive. The bottom line is that racial barriers do exist, class is a very important factor to "achieving" the American Dream, and pulling yourself up by the bootstraps is an impossible task, literally. Although this is true, the cracks in the system allow for the Dream to live on, and television is that perfect tool for a non threatening entrance into the facade of this system.

Learning the many implications that race and class have on American viewers I would want to know if this show would be as successful if the Johnson family were not situated in a middle class background. Recently, I have watched *Shameless*, a television show that exemplifies a sitcom in the messiest of ways. The family in *Shameless* is not wealthy, in fact they steal often to pay the bills, their father is a drunk and their mother is no longer in the picture. I find it interesting to see a show that deliberately shows a less affluent family, and has been as successful as to produce 9 seasons thus far. While reading the work of Jhally and Lewis, they found that audience members, no matter their class, found that *The Cosby Show* was relatable to their own lives. In future directions with the work I have been doing, I would want to see if a

show such as *Shameless* would be as successful if the characters were coming from an African American background.

At the beginning of this project I fully believed that *Blackish* was finally the black sitcom that was necessary to provide growth in this industry. A sitcom that was progressive in every episode by the way it discussed controversial topics that are not typically discussed so bluntly. While watching *Blackish* as a regular audience member I didn't read between the lines due to the lack of knowledge I had on the bigger picture of black sitcoms. As I began to learn more and more about how black sitcoms are portrayed I came to find that there were more issues with *Blackish* than I had anticipated. Although many critics have acclaimed the progress that *Blackish* has brought to the television community, it is not what it seems. Upon my further research I believe that *Blackish* supports the system of the American Dream. Although the American Dream does not support the fact that class matters to be successful and accepted, *Blackish* continues to glorify lower class Americans, saying they have the same opportunities to achieve their dream life. In my chapter about defining blackness, I informed my readers that instead of assuming the cultural and political works of blackness, we need to critically interrogate why and how the notion of popular black culture has been created despite black reality. Upon watching *Blackish* more, I came to find out that this sitcom is exactly that, however, I still find holes in the way that *Blackish* brings light to these issues. As I discussed in my analysis, Dre, the father of the family speaks as if he should be speaking for the whole community. As a member of the middle class, who has a background in an "authentic" black community, viewers should believe him right? The problem with this double background is that for one, this is a made up character. Dre and his family may be based on real life experiences as well as thoughts, but parading this

family does not make up for the real life families who will not have the luxury of moving up to the middle class. So, does *Blackish* deserve the praise of being as progressive as critics say? I could see both sides to this answer. With the research I have conducted I can't give a straight answer. There is much more to *Blackish* than it being simply progressive, or simply not, yet I do believe we are on a better track towards building an true black image in television.

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