

SECOND EDITION
GENDER,
RACE,
AND
CLASS
IN
MEDIA
A TEXT-READER

GAIL DINES
Wheelock College

JEAN M. HUMEZ
University of Massachusetts, Boston
EDITORS

 SAGE Publications 2003
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks ■ London ■ New Delhi

BLACK SITCOM PORTRAYALS

◆ Robin R. Means Coleman

◆ *Class Depictions*

Through television, race has frequently been linked to the underclass, more specifically the working poor. Beulah of *Beulah* and Nell of *Gimme a Break* may have worked as maids in fine middle-class households, but we were not led to believe that *they* were middle class. Instead they appeared fully reliant upon their White families for not only a paycheck, but a place to live, eat, and sleep—in essence, their very survival. Fred of *Sanford and Son* was an entrepreneur who lived in his junkyard, much like Roc of the series *Roc* who lived with the junk he collected on his garbage route. Therefore, the inferiority assigned to the race is also often linked to class failures, that is, the lack of upward mobility. And while depictions of the poor/working class, such as *Good Times*, have garnered some praise, when African Americans are presented as breaking economic boundaries that is typically reserved for White portrayals, the portrayals draw intense scrutiny as we see with *The Jeffersons*. While the participants struggled to offer a genre-wide assessment of what favorable traits the comedies held, a number of them found it easier to provide specific examples, within

NOTE: Copyright © 2000. From *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy*, 2nd ed., by Robin R. Means Coleman. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., a member of the Taylor & Francis Group. Reprinted with permission.

Dines & Howe (eds.), *Gender, Race and Class 2 Media; 2nd Edition*
(Safe, 2003)

1: *Housewife*.
Press.
novel: *A sur-*
lon: Mills &

3). Fawcett
h brand mar-
ers *Weekly*,

earing act: A
es. *Signs*, 5,

gy of *house-*

k: *The house-*
New York:

he romance:
lar literature.
orth Carolina

single programs, that are evidence of the elusive positive. Freddie and J. C. credited *The Jeffersons* for presenting economic achievement within the Black community.

For Freddie, who does not share the economic status depicted on *The Jeffersons*, the series becomes important because it assigns a higher class status, and in turn elevates the race, which is often seen as not self-sufficient, or failing to be economically contributory to society.

F. D.: "Here's a guy [George Jefferson], got a little money from a loan to open up the cleaning business, and he's able to expand and move up. But it's good to show, yes. . . . [It shows] we can hire Black people . . . in the community."

J. C., too, was not part of the economic class as seen in *The Jeffersons*, and thus the series was positive, not because he shared an identification with the characters' socioeconomic level, but because it offered a unique image of rich African Americans.

J. C. B.: "Yeah, I think it's important to see because too many of our Blacks that achieve, the community for the most part tends to shun them and call them names, [such as] tryin' to be White and all this stuff like that. And I think it's positive to have more people that are showing advancement in life."

So here, Freddie lends importance to not only self-sufficiency, but also maintaining contact with the lower and working class in the Black community. This contact seems key, as J. C. reveals, because wealth can be misconstrued as Whiteness, as seen in the assimilation controversy that haunted *Julia* and *The Cosby Show*. Again, then, we are reminded how bound Blackness and economic deprivation is on television, and in turn, in the minds of viewers.

Fresh Prince of Bel Air also received a favorable nod from some participants for depictions of poor, ghetto-dwelling African Americans and wealthy, suburban ones still being able to interact. Lonette cited this single series for handling the two classes in an exemplary manner.

L. E.: "Well, it's still clean comedy. It shows how a brother from the 'hood has relatives that are very wealthy and they are different, and the same; how they help each other. The uncle, . . . Phil treats the Fresh Prince just like a son. He doesn't treat him as if he has made it out of the ghetto, and 'here I have this nephew from the ghetto and he is this big problem for me.' He is very loving and he treats him exactly like a son. I like the way they blend the two different communities together. I really enjoy that."

Class, as Lonette, J. C., and Freddie are negotiating it, is not about material worth, but rather is an often overlooked cultural yardstick for Blackness. With a growing Black middle class in American society, African Americans are no longer economically, geographically, or educationally restricted. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1998), detailed in his PBS documentary *The Two Nations of Black America*, Martha's Vineyard is now a popular African American vacation spot; Blacks have their own exclusive restaurants complete with doorman and valet parking; and what W. E. B. Du Bois would call the "talented tenth" are assembling think tanks in the most prestigious ivy leagues. Gates ponders over this newly created socioeconomic gap between the Black working class and the upper echelon as the middle and upper classes continue to grow.

These three participants seem to hold similar concerns, yet find solace in representations such as *The Jeffersons* and *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, where having "arrived" is

o received a
 ticipants for
 lling African
 an ones still
 e cited this
 two classes

comedy. It
 r from the
 at are very
 fferent, and
 each other.
 ts the Fresh
 He doesn't
 ade it out of
 I have this
 o and he is
 . He is very
 him exactly
 y they blend
 ommunities
 that."

Freddie are
 erial worth,
 ked cultural
 a growing
 can society,
 er economi-
 cationally
 Gates, Jr.
 ocumentary
 k *America*,
 a popular
 pot; Blacks
 urants com-
 arking; and
 call the "tal-
 ink tanks in
 . Gates pon-
 cioeconomic
 ig class and
 e and upper

em to hold
 ce in repre-
 s and *Fresh*
 "arrived" is

not depicted as leaving behind cultural con-
 nectedness such as music, dance, art, dress,
 religion, food, and history, along with con-
 cerns over how race relations and racism
 still impacts their much enriched lives.

Race and class consciousness appear to
 be an unwieldy conundrum for the partici-
 pants (as it is for Gates) who, on the one
 hand, argue that television has failed to rep-
 resent the full economic spectrum of
 African Americans. Yet they also seem to
 believe that (a) all economically ascended
 Blacks have their immediate roots in the
 underclass and/or ghetto, and (b) "real"
 Blacks never forget or sever themselves
 from this underclass.

J. C. thought *The Jeffersons* made an
 important contribution to Black imagery by
 presenting what he called economic
 achievement. He again works to identify
 a single, exemplar attribute in a series,
 this time in *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. J. C.
 acknowledged that this series too depicted
 Black wealth; however, he was most struck
 by one character's moralistic representa-
 tion. As a devout Christian, J. C. sees a
 void in television where morally sound
 behaviors are rarely depicted, yet the
 wayward and inappropriate are privileged.
 He saw one character, *Fresh Prince's*
 Carlton, as finally breaking the deviance
 mold.

J. C. B.: "There are some good, like the
 Carlton character on *The Fresh
 Prince*. He's a good kid. I don't
 like the fact that when they have
 him dealing with other Blacks
 they negative him so much, you
 know. If I had a son, and I had a
 choice of my son being like this
 kid, or being like, say Martin or
 somebody, I would prefer this
 kid [Carlton] over here."

For J. C., Carlton is a "good kid"
 because the character possesses values
 such as good behavior, honesty, a love for
 education, and a respect for his parents that

is rarely seen in depictions of young Black
 males. Few, if any of these values are pre-
 sented as being prized in Carlton's counter-
 part on the series, Will. J. C.'s lament is that
 when such positive portrayals, such as
 Carlton's, do appear, they are the source
 for ridicule by the other Black characters,
 and hence, "they negative him so much."

FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS

... Several participants, whether they
 considered the programs positive or nega-
 tive, believe that the depiction of the Black
 family is a notable strength of the genre.
 Lonette shares her opinion of *Good Times*.

L. E.: "*Good Times*. It was funny. It was
 about the dozens kinda. They did
 play the dozens in every episode.
 [Yet] I think that particular show
 targeted a lower-class Black family
 trying to struggle to make it, yet
 they stuck together as a family,
 they showed how hard it is to be
 poor and try to make it. But they
 had, there was a lot of love in that
 family. Although they were poor,
 there was a lot of love there."

In my conversations with Gale, a devout
 Christian, she emphasized and reempha-
 sized that she views herself as a strong,
 independent woman. This assertion is
 important because she also believes that
 men should be leaders in the church and the
 heads of households. Her beliefs are rooted,
 she says, in Bible Scripture, and it is her bib-
 lically based values that also moves her to
 support her husband's participation in the
 Promise Keepers movement. Also politi-
 cally conscious, Gale advances her belief
 that men, especially Black men, should be
 seen as "head man" or authority because
 African American men are the least
 respected and accepted by (White) America.
 Ever deemed threatening to non-African
 Americans, Gale believes the Black male is

dismissed by a society who finds African American women as less threatening. Thus, Black women, more than Black men, have an increasing number of opportunities available to them (e.g., access to higher education and employment). Gale argues that once Black men are viewed as leaders in society, their sense of self-worth and self-esteem can be restored.

Insight into Gale's values and belief system helps us to understand her praise for *Good Times*, the first Black sitcom to feature an intact traditional family. In reading her remarks, keep in mind the series' star Esther Rolle had to *demand* that the father character be written into the series.

G. E.: "Well, I liked Esther Rolle. I felt she played a good, strong Black woman figure. And I liked her husband too, James. Because he was always in control. Because nothing got past James and he was actually functioning as the head of the household. They didn't make him look like a buffoon, an idiot. And they didn't let him be a welcome mat where they could walk all over him. So he still had control of the family. Even though the son, J. J., he had a tendency to waver. But somebody always brought him back in line. . . . That's important to see because we need role models. We need good, positive role models—standing up, being the father figure, the mother figure."

Gale was just one of several participants who hailed the presence of two, loving parents in a household. The *Make Room for Daddys*, the *Leave It to Beavers*, and the more contemporary *Roseannes* and (albeit, trashy) *Married . . . With Childrens* all naturally, and almost automatically featured a husband and wife team. Most family-oriented Black sitcoms, however, seemed to have a spouse missing. Just consider a few comedies: *Julia*, *Sanford and Son*, *That's My Mama*, *What's Happening!*, *The*

Gregory Hines Show, *Me and the Boys*, *Sinbad*, *Thea*, *South Central*, *Out All Night*, and *Amen*.

Robert, who was raised by both parents (today his mother is a widow), is particularly cognizant of the single-parent trend.

Like Gale, he prefers series that portray an intact family. For him, *Roc* was exemplary, even more so, because it also depicted an extended-family bond.

R. P.: "He [Roc] tried to portray more of a father image than in any other Black comedy that I've seen. Him and his wife were together, which was important to me. It was a Black man and a Black woman. He was also helping out his family as far as his brother was concerned and his father was living with him."

Some participants acknowledged that certain series are now featuring praiseworthy Black men (e.g., *Sinbad*, *Me and the Boys*, *The Gregory Hines Show*). When positive, responsible father figures are depicted, such portrayals do not go unnoticed. Dana, a newlywed raised in a single-parent home, is particularly sensitive to familial representations. She identifies *Me and the Boys* for what was its exceptional representation of a role-model father. She also likes that this comedy was very funny.

D. A.: "It is just so funny. His character, he is light-hearted, he's a good father. His children are real children. They're not like good all the time. They're real kids, they get into some things. The fact that his mother-in-law's there and supporting him. And he talks about his wife even though she's passed on. He talks about her very favorably. And then he has his sister. Um, very positive role models in it. . . . Not everybody is the same carbon copy of one another. It's refreshing, it's a refreshing show. I like that."

NEGATIVE/STEREOTYPICAL

... J. C. did not explicitly cite the comedies for depicting African Americans as being oversexed as Billie had. He did, however, note that the Black females are frequently portrayed as partnerless, yet ever-hungry jezebel characterizations. J. C. also offers that on television such women often choose good looks over substance. Such a selection, J. C. believes, is rarely communicated as a poor choice for women, or as one that can backfire. He observes that the comedies often depict a deficient woman in love with a deficient man, and that somehow this is an acceptable relationship.

J. C. B.: "The woman who can't find a steady man, the Jackée character [from 227], the *Thea* character, the *That's My Mama* character. There's always that one sister that can't find a man. And if she does find a man, he is the good looking suave guy who is so screwed up."

J. C. continues that the African American male is not only depicted as deficient in love, but also in family life. J. C. noted the presence of what I call "White savior" sitcoms (e.g., *Diff'rent Strokes*; *Webster*). In these comedies, Black children are rescued from their dysfunctional families or communities by Whites. If it is not Whites depicted as coming to the rescue, then others in the Black community are called upon to intervene in negligent familial situations. These troubled families are presented as deviant due to the absence of the Black father. J. C. believes, that be it the "White savior," or the Black intervener scenario, the message is the same: Black men are largely failures. . . .

For the participants, female images are plentiful, but are as troubling as the imagistic mistreatment of Black men. Billie and Claire take great offense at the portrayal of women and the misogynistic abuse

directed toward them. Billie shares what most upsets her about the depiction of women. She draws on *Martin* to illustrate what is most wrong with the comedies.

B. B.: "... they're always puttin' women down and talking about their butts, even when it's a decent little comedy or something, they make fun of each other so bad, and I hate that. Nothing ever positive about each other. Every show just about, you know what's gonna happen. They're gonna talk about each other. They're gonna put each other down. The men are gonna talk about the women. The women are gonna make strong statements against the men. Same old thing. . . . *Martin's* gonna make fun of one of the women on the show, even his girlfriend or talk about her butt. I just hate that negativity."

Claire too cites *Martin* as blameworthy for its garish, offensive depictions. Her dismay over the gross exaggerations and self-deprecating ridicule depicted on this series is congruent to the term "hyper-racial."

C. R.: "For instance, like *Martin's* show, he exaggerates some of the characters, especially the women characters. He exaggerates them. . . . A lot of them are exaggerated. But he exaggerated the character of his mother! He exaggerates the character of Sheneneh. His characters are not complimentary at all. I cannot see how someone could not be offended by that. For some reason, they have to push it to the point of buffoonery. I know a lot of the people are offended by some of the things he does, but I still like the show. To a degree, I still like the show."

Claire began to explore what troubles her about the depictions of women, and

ended up making what was, even to her, a surprising confession—she truly likes the comedies, even those like the controversial *Martin*. Although she qualifies her remarks by saying, “to a degree, I still like the show,” she feels compelled to make sense of her reception. Aloud she inventoried her thoughts, stating that she finds the lead character in *Martin* a despicable presentation, but, at the same time, his physical, slapstick humor is genuinely funny. In the end, Claire surmises, she can occasionally overlook or tolerate the negative portrayals (“exaggerations” as she called them) because she loves comedies. Her only alternative is to give up Black portrayals, and not watch. . . .

There is one other issue that several participants said plagued them—Hollywood’s preference for lighter-skinned African Americans. A new twist on “White is right,” the participants saw television communicating that African Americans with White features are better. Gale believes it all began with *Julia*, a series blasted for shedding its Blackness opting for assimilationist Whiteness.

G. E.: I didn’t like *Julia*. Because they took Diahann Carroll. She portrayed a nurse. First of all, to me, she doesn’t look like a Black woman. She has the features of a European. They were trying to push this European looking Black woman off as a Black woman. . . . I never cared for *Julia*.”

Jennifer states that she could never see the character *Julia* as being a representative Black woman. Her fairer skin complexion, long and straight hair, and glamorous look was not the average Black female. More, Jennifer feels few Black women could have lived up to *Julia*’s standard of beauty. Speaking of herself, Jennifer laments:

J. F.: “I’m not a pretty Black woman that’s a nurse like on *Julia*. That’s

very refined, very pretty, very sophisticated, you know.”

. . . Robert, a darker-skinned male, intimates that he feels rejected by television’s erasure of those who look like him. He uses *The Cosby Show* to lay bare the intraracial harm he believes people who look like him can experience.

R. P.: “And everyone in the [Huxtable] family was high yellow. . . . And that is not the norm for the Black family. That’s not reality. In all families there’s all shades of color. What it really comes down to is, ah, even as a child with my dark complexion I was segregated within my own race because of the complexion of my skin. I grew up like that. For years and years and years, until I was mature enough to understand what was going on. The real problem with that, as I see it, is we’re bringing up children doing the same thing we were doing 30 years ago. The lighter you are, the better you are.”

African American ◆ Culture/Communities

In this final subtheme, some of the participants related that Black situation comedies present characters and situations that are so dissimilar from Blackness, that is, African American culture and communities, that they find the images, and the inherent messages, incongruent to their lived experiences, beliefs, and values. . . .

Several participants wanted to emphasize their dissatisfaction with the absence of the Black church, a prominent part of the culture’s infrastructure, in Black situation comedies. Billie, who is not even a regular church-goer, still sees the importance of featuring the church.

B. B.: "You never see a situation on TV where the family goes to church. I'd like to see a good Christian family portrayed."

Calvin, a church leader, also finds this omission striking. To him, it makes African Americans look morally sloven when viewers do not have an opportunity to see Blacks engaged in worship.

C. E.: "They don't never go to church, they don't say nothing about God."

The core group of participants were provided the opportunity to address the issue of the depiction of Black church during the second round of interviews. Some found the topic relevant and supported the constructions of Billie and Calvin.

Billie elaborates on her original point.

B. B.: "[The Black church is seen] only in a derogatory way. Just jumpin' around, dancin'. Black people's roots are in the church, but they never see us as Catholics or Presbyterians. Just [as] rockin' and dancin' and jumpin' up and down."

J. C. and Jennifer, who are actively involved with their churches, argue that all religions are either overlooked completely, or when included, they are portrayed negatively. J. C. begins:

J. C.: "I don't know they show [the positive] about the White church either. I guess it's the church in general they don't show."

Jennifer agreed:

J. F.: "I don't think that the church is ever portrayed in a positive light, period. Whether it's the Black church, the White church. There just seems to be a disdain for the church and

everybody is portrayed as crazy. Even in drama, they're completely insane. If they're really a homicidal maniac they've had some religious influence, um . . . [the film] *Cape Fear*. So it's not just the Black church, it's universal."

. . . Finally, we hear from Jennifer, who notes that sometimes the comedies attempt to "probe" (as Benjamin called it) too much into Black struggles, settling singularly on issues of racism. . . .

J. F.: "Well see, I have a problem with watching TV where it deals with social issues and racism because I have to deal with it too much in real life, and I don't want to watch it for entertainment. And I usually pretty much avoid shows, if they're going to get into race, I pretty much don't watch it. Because, um, who wants to deal with something as entertainment that is too close to reality. I don't want to think about it all the time.

"If I'm on my job I have to wonder, um, am I being overlooked for this because of my race? Am I going to have to act different because of my race? Um, is the sales clerk in the store dealing with me like this because of my race? Am I not being waited on because of my race? Ok. Then I have to deal with, how do I vote because of my race. Um, how's this politician going to affect me because he's a White politician? How does he regard race? So, I have to deal with it every day, I don't want to deal with it when I'm sitting down relaxing, you know. And then when you deal with it on TV, you have to see the full scope of it. You have to see the issue, you have to see how it affected them, you have to see how it hurt them and then, you have to see that they don't have any more solution than you

do. And then, so you're frustrated about your own life, and then you're going to be frustrated about some TV character's life too. And you don't want to deal with that. I don't want to be frustrated about some fictional situation on TV that has no solution, and then you have to think about that, and then with it in your own life too. So when they start getting into that I stop watching the show. So I stopped watching *Roc* when they started getting into all that."

◆ *Black Like Me? Identity and Self-Image*

How do African Americans regard themselves in relation to the characters appearing in Black situation comedies? We may *think* we know the answer based on some previously detailed sharp criticisms of the genre. These Black viewers will probably shun the characterizations, seeing absolutely no congruence between these funny men and women and their own self-image.

Well, this vantage point is only half correct. Indeed, the participants did find the portrayals dissimilar to their self-image—their personal, internal definition of Blackness. However, some also commented on how akin the comedic images really are to their personal situations. . . .

SIMILAR

Some participants were able to identify similarities between themselves, their experiences, or Black culture, and the depictions of Blackness in Black situation comedies. Robyn, Lonette, and Jennifer each identified some compatibility between the lived experiences of African Americans and that which is represented on television.

Robyn shared with me the trials she faced in starting her own (successful)

business, finding a mate who could tolerate her independent spirit, and challenging the "unprofessional professional" myth associated with those like her who are deemed "minority contracts" in the White business world. She maintains that real-life scenarios of struggle like these inform the comedies' content.

R. F.: "Well, when I'm watching a show and it's talking about the struggle that we were going through or some of the prejudice we run up against, I've experienced most of that stuff or know someone who has, so it's pretty much true. I think when . . . a comedy is made, it's based on some real stuff, that's what makes it funny. So I think it's pretty close to real life, I think that's where it comes from. Yeah."

Part of the Black situation comedy definition is that this genre of programming often makes a point of attending to Black issues: the racial, economic, political, and social, as they pertain to the Black community. Robyn clearly has picked up on this unique feature of the programming, since she has identified its ability to address racial discrimination and other trials.

Likewise, Lonette describes the comedies as also capturing the personal and the social of the Black experience.

L. E.: "I would say that they resemble various people in life. I would say that it's not totally unrealistic. There are, as a Black person who has experienced relationships, or have relationships, or has some kind of contact with other Black people on all social levels, I would say that these shows represent the variety of Black people and their personal and social lives."

. . . Rose and Jasmine also praised the comedies' ability to capture the nuances of

familial relationships. Each was able to correlate her family experiences to those presented in the comedies.

Rose, who was raised with both parents present, believes *The Cosby Show* depicted a relationship between parent and child that closely resembled the interactions she had with her parents when she was a youth.

R. K.: "It [*The Cosby Show*] was funny because, um, a lot of it I can relate to. The way they dealt with their kids, the same way my parents dealt with me."

Jasmine and her siblings were reared by her widower father. She relates that although her family structure was a bit different, she still could identify with the family situations in the Black comedies.

J. F.: "Just like some of the relationships with the children. You know, the way they, the way they talk to each other and stuff. I can just see my brothers and sisters when we were little doing stuff or teasing each other or getting away with stuff. Or telling on each other. So, that way, I guess in the children's portrayals, yeah. Um, the way the husband and the wife relate. I can relate to that, but I can't say that I saw that in my family."

Valerie, Lonette, and Jasmine each cited similarities between their self-image as independent Black women and the portrayals of what they described as strong African American women.

Valerie sees herself as a bit of a fighter and most certainly a survivor. A few years ago, she recovered from a very serious accident that left her critically ill. Today she has taken on the difficult task of caring for an ailing parent, a parent who is extremely angry about experiencing deteriorating health. More, during my contact with Valerie, she revealed that the father of her child is ever-threatening a custody battle

(a battle that has yet to come to fruition). Valerie identifies only with the strongest and the most independent women in Black situation comedy—the women of *Living Single*. "As long as they portray . . . a positive, strong Black woman," she remarked, she would continue to identify with this group of single entrepreneurs, who are self-sufficient.

Lonette, a college senior, too expresses an ability to see herself in the characters presented on *Living Single*. For her, the characters' friendships, independence, and entrepreneurial spirit struck a chord of familiarity.

L. E.: "Yeah, I would say *Living Single*, being independent, young women. Um, the role that Queen Latifah plays as an entrepreneur, I was an entrepreneur once. I see myself aspiring to achieve other goals. So I would say that her character and some of the other characters on that show resemble the lifestyle that I've led and [am] trying to lead again. . . . Because I can identify with those particular young women being women of the 90s, single, independent, interdependent young women who rely on each other as sisters. It's a bond of sisterhood. They have their differences, however, the middle ground is that 'hey we're sisters, we're in this together.' It's a really for-real show, and how good friends work out different situations. They are successful Black women. It's a very, very encouraging show. I would say the different personalities, you could see one of your friends being one of those characters."

I encouraged the participants to consider whether they could see themselves in any of the comedy portrayals, or whether any specific character resembled their experiences. Jasmine was hesitant to liken herself to anything she essentially viewed

as being negative. Like Valerie, she did concede that she saw herself in some of the stronger African American females. She remarks that she is particularly attracted to women who do not put up with troublesome nonsense, but who are disciplinarians in their households, not just with their children, but in most situations encountered.

J. F.: "Um, not all of them, but, the Black woman role. I was just thinking like *Thea*, if you ever watched that show. And then, like on *Roc*, Eleanor, like even though a lot of things happen, when she got mad you knew it was 'time' [that she was angry and everyone should straighten up]. And then like even on *The Cosby Show* with Claire, when she said, 'That is it!,' that was it! So I think that, I think, um, the strong Black woman role, yeah."

... There were a few images identified as congruent to a select group of viewers' self-image. I found it fascinating that African American women talked about how well the comedies captured their spirit of strength and independence. The characters cited as positive, realistic images of Black women were those that seemed to have little in common with each other. The *Thea* character of the same-titled series was a poor single parent; Eleanor of *Roc* was married and working class; Claire

Huxtable of *The Cosby Show* was an upper-middle-class attorney with a host of children; and the women of *Living Single* were variously employed and educated, but all were self-sufficient and moderately successful. The tie that seems to bind all these female characters together is their depicted interaction with men. These characters held equal status to their male counterparts. They were as self-sufficient, as capable, as smart, and as hard working. They were not reliant upon men for validation or worth; rather, they were self-possessed, never submissive, and appeared to have high self-esteem. These women, it was argued, were more like real Black women.

These characters (e.g., Eleanor; Claire) resisted the stereotypes that so often encumber other female depictions. Absent from this list of congruent images is the sexual predator jezebel, the ever-ready to fight Sheneneh, or the loud-mouth Sapphire/mammy characterizations. The participants are both choosy and savvy (who would say I am Aunt Esther of *Sanford and Son*?) in their selection of more dignified roles to dub as similar to themselves. Thus we see the participants reject distorted characters who possess some deficiency—the socially powerless—opting instead to accept only the powerful part of the images. This means, the positive, at times, must be carved out of imagery of exaggeration and ridicule.