

BLACK SITUATIONAL COMEDIES: A LEGACY OF STEREOTYPES, IDEOLOGY, AND HEGEMONY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to outline re-occurring archetypes that are found within the confines of “*Black Sitcoms*”. This essay demonstrates how these archetypes perpetuate negative stereotypes about teenage, African American males, under the guise of comedy and entertainment. This is accomplished by introducing the two most utilized archetypes that represent the black, teenaged, male which are prevalent in black sitcoms, along with examples of said archetypes. In doing so, this article also demonstrates a dichotomy between these two character types, in an attempt to highlight disturbing acceptance of certain media narratives about the African American community. Furthermore, explanations are provided as to how each archetype preys upon negative stereotypes and sociological taboos within the African American community, which results in negative impacts on the social consciousness of the African American community. What is more, this essay examines the negative ideology and subsequent hegemony that these television shows produce. Finally, I conclude with my own thoughts, regarding these issues.

Keywords: African American, situational comedies, archetype, ideology, hegemony, stereotypes

ABSTRAK

Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menguraikan munculnya kembali arketipe-arketipe yang terdapat dalam tayangan komedi situasi yang diperankan oleh orang kulit hitam Amerika atau yang dikenal dengan istilah “Black Sitcoms”. Tulisan ini menunjukkan bagaimana arketipe-arketipe yang ada mengekalkan stereotip negatif tentang remaja laki-laki Afrika Amerika, yang dikemas dalam tayangan komedi dan hiburan. Hal ini dibuktikan dengan menampilkan dua arketipe yang paling sering digunakan dalam tayangan tersebut yang mewakili remaja laki-laki berkulit hitam dengan contoh arketipe yang ada. Berkaitan dengan hal tersebut, artikel ini juga menunjukkan dikotomi antara dua tipe karakter ini, dalam upaya menyoroti anggapan yang meresahkan tentang masyarakat Afrika Amerika sebagai hasil dari

narasi media tertentu. Lebih lanjut, terdapat penjelasan tentang bagaimana masing-masing arketipe menyebabkan stereotip negatif dan hal-hal tabu secara sosiologis dalam komunitas Afrika Amerika, sehingga memberikan dampak negatif pada kesadaran sosial masyarakat Afrika Amerika. Secara lebih mendalam, esai ini meneliti ideologi negatif dan hegemoni yang akan datang sebagai hasil dari tayangan-tayangan televisi sejenis. Sebagai penutup, penulis memberikan kesimpulan secara subyektif berkaitan dengan permasalahan yang dipaparkan dalam esai ini.

Kata kunci: Afrika Amerika, komedi situasi, arketipe, ideologi, hegemoni, stereotipe

A. WHAT IS A “BLACK SITCOM”?

Generally speaking, a *sitcom* is defined as a *situation comedy*. A *Black Sitcom* would therefore be a situation comedy involving main characters that are African American. This essay will focus on what many consider to be the “upper echelon” of black sitcoms that revolve around a black family, seemingly living out the American dream. These sitcoms are *The Cosby Show*, *Family Matters* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. These three sitcoms are hailed as trendsetters because they re-defined the black experience on television. *The Cosby Show* exposed us to an upper-middle class black family, in which the father is a doctor and the mother is lawyer. This was unheard of in the black sitcoms of the 70’s and 80’s. *Family Matters* re-defined this concept by highlighting the blue-collar, working class African American family. This concept was further re-invented with the advent of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, which exposed audiences to a wealthy, black family who is forced to cope with the lower-class antics of their relative who comes to stay with them (Leonard and Guerrero, 2013).

B. CHARACTER ARCHETYPES

An archetype is a pattern or model from which all things of the same kind are copied or on which they are based. According to TV Tropes, a “archetypal character” is a character that has a set criteria. This character is recycled and used over and over again, appearing in several different television shows. In the case of black sitcoms, there is a re-occurring set of character archetypes that reveal themselves time and time again. In this section, I will define each archetype, give examples and show the dichotomy between these two central archetypes.

C. THE STATUS QUO NEGRO

This is the most popular archetype in black sitcoms. The Status Quo Negro is the character that conforms to the accepted narrative and perpetuates every negative stereotype made about African Americans. He is rightfully referred to as being “status quo” because his character has not progressed and has stayed in the exact same condition, since the advent of black sitcoms. This character dresses black, talks black, and acts black. He embraces his “blackness” and is even proud of it. He often plays the role of the trickster or class clown. He is lazy and has no tangible, aspirations, ambitions or life goals. He prefers to take short cuts when dealing with serious issues and prefers instant gratification, to long term satisfaction. What he lacks in intellect, he makes up for in athletic prowess, usually basketball or football. He is more often than not a good street dancer and good Hip Hop performer. He is a rebel who does not conform well to rules and is, by nature loud and confrontational when challenged. He is also a seducer, who is able to start relationships with multiple women easily. Will Smith, from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, and Eddie Winslow from *Family Matters* and Theodore Huxtable from *The Cosby Show* personify this archetype.

Will Smith is the product of a broken home, after his father suddenly leaves him and his mother. He is athletic, and his basketball prowess lands him on the Bel Air Academy basketball team. In his teenage years, Will is a womanizer, who often brags about his “Chicktionary”, a booklet containing the names and phone numbers of hundreds of women. He is an under achiever, who has no real long term goals, ambitions or aspirations. He slacks off in school, never taking his studies seriously, and he does not conform to school rules, as seen in the pilot episode where Will wears his school uniform inside out. He is also a rebel and a hedonist who does not abide by the house rules set by his uncle Phil. He often takes on the role of the clown, when disrespecting his Uncle Phil with a barrage of “Fat Jokes” and he seemingly takes pleasure in being mocked by others. He dresses in urban clothing, uses Ebonics when speaking, and enjoys listening to and creating rap songs. He is also famously known for “Dumb Dancing”, which is a form of urban dancing where the movements are exaggerated for a comedic effect (Vincent, 1993).

Eddie Winslow is athletic; having a passion for the NBA and NFL, and his athletic prowess lands him on his school’s basketball team. In his teenage years, Eddie is a womanizer, having dated so many different girls, his neighbor Steve often jokingly recalls the names of every single girlfriend Eddie has had when Eddie is in the company of a new girl. Eddie is an under achiever, who has no real long term goals, ambitions or aspirations. He does poorly in school and has the typical traits of a high school slacker. He is also a rebel and a hedonist who does not abide by

the house rules set by his father Carl. Eddie is a troublemaker, having once been arrested for joyriding in a stolen car in the episode titled “*Jailhouse Blues*”, and he has a gambling addiction, which lands him in deep trouble, as seen in episodes like “Fast Eddie Winslow” and “Busted”. He dresses in urban clothing, uses Ebonics when speaking, and enjoys listening to Hip Hop music (Vincent, 1993).

Theo Huxtable is athletic; having a passion for basketball, which lands him on his school’s basketball team. In his teenage years, Theo is only obsessed with impressing girls, and obtaining a sports car or motorcycle to bolster his status. Theo is an under achiever, who has no real long term goals, ambitions or aspirations. He does not take school, studying or exams seriously, as seen in the pilot episode, where he is lectured by his father for not applying himself at school. His intellect is below average, which makes him the subject of jokes and ridicule by his sisters. He is a lazy individual, who disregards the rules at home and in school (Cliff Huxtable constantly argues with him about not doing his chores or cleaning his room). He dresses in urban clothing, uses Ebonics when speaking, and enjoys listening to and composing rap songs with his friends (Vincent, 1993).

D. THE SOCIAL OUTCAST

This particular character archetype is often utilized in black sitcoms as means for comic relief. This character is often mocked and alienated because he does not conform to the “status quo of blackness”. The Social Outcast is meant to stand out due to their appearance, personality and mannerisms which are seen as “White”. They are often referred to as being “*Sell Outs*” because they do not exemplify African American stereotypes. Instead they willingly and knowingly shed themselves of their “blackness” and choose to adopt a personality archetype similar to that of educated “White Folks”. They may be outwardly black but inwardly they personify stereotypical, Caucasian characteristics. They are responsible, hard working and have aspirations, ambitions and life goals. These characters are conservative and not rebellious, opting to listening to and obeying the rules. They are shy introverts, who lack confidence when dealing with the opposite sex and are, for the most part “loners” with very little friends. They are meant to be the antonym of the Status Quo Negro archetype. Carlton Banks from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and Steve Urkel from *Family Matters* personify this archetype.

Carlton Banks is not very athletic but he enjoys playing tennis and is a member of a prestigious Golf Club with his father. Carlton is a self proclaimed virgin, whose conservative personality renders him too shy to talk to women. He is a hardworking individual who has aspirations of attending Princeton University, following in his father’s footsteps. Carlton is an active student who is part of the

Glee and Debate clubs at Bel Air Academy and he studies hard to maintain his high GPA score. He is highly intelligent and highly articulate when he speaks. He is the ideal son who listens to and obeys his father and stays clear of trouble. His outwardly appearance consists of wearing shorts, pastel colored polo shirts and plaid socks, which makes him look “preppy”. He enjoys listening to Tom Jones and his idol is Macaulay Culkin. He is best known for his iconic dance “The Carlton” where he dances “white”. (Vincent, 1993)

Steve Urkel is the epitome of “nerdiness”. His iconic suspenders that hold up his “flood” pants, thick glasses, cardigan sweaters along with his high pitched voice and snorting laughter definitely makes him a geek and a social outcast. He recognises his blackness but sheds it for a persona likened to the stereotypical, geeky, white teenager. For example, he loves to play the accordion, enjoys clog dancing and cheese tasting. He is a shy, introverted individual who is dorky, yet kind hearted and good natured. What he lacks in athletic prowess, he more than makes up for with scientific brilliance, having invented machines that defy science and logic (A machine that alters his DNA, turning him into different personalities). He is also best known for his iconic tag line “Did I do that?” and the “Urkel Dance”, which is a series of uncoordinated and jerky movements meant to mimic the stereotypical, uncoordinated dance moves of white people (Vincent, 1993).

An interesting aspect to the Social Outcast archetype is that in order to gain acceptance as a “real black man”, they have to betray their very nature. They have to shed themselves of that which makes them outcasts and embrace the stereotypical Negro narrative. They must cast aside their Caucasian tendencies and fully become the Status Quo Negro. It is only through this transformation that they are seen as being “cool” characters, which are respected and accepted by other African American teens.

In the episode titled “72 Hours” Will bets Carlton that he could not survive a night in Compton, a black ghetto. Carlton accepts and fulfills that bet when he transforms himself into a gangster named “C-Note”. Once Carlton has made this transformation from “preppy” to “gang member”, he is accepted by other African American males who look to him as a leader. He is accepted into the gang because he is the personification of the stereotypical Black teenager in America (the Status Quo Negro).

Steve Urkel undergoes a similar transformation in an episode titled “Dr. Urkel and Mr. Cool”. In this episode Steve creates “Cool Juice”, which after he ingests, transforms him into Stefan Urquelle. As Stefan, Steve sheds himself of everything that once made him an outcast. His geeky attire is replaced by “pimp” suits, he loses his dorky glasses and his once high pitched, geeky voice is replaced with a deep baritone voice. As Stefan, Steve becomes a ladies’ man, who can seduce women

with a few words. He even gets to date Laura, Carl's daughter who has rejected Steve's advances in every episode prior to his transformation. It is only as Stefan, that Steve is seen as being truly "Black" since, as Stefan, Steve fits into the Status Quo Negro archetype.

E. THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN THE STATUS QUO NEGRO AND THE SOCIAL OUTCAST

The Status Quo Negro and the Social Outcast archetypes are indeed polar opposites in every way imaginable. One is the personification of blackness, as narrated by the popular culture, while the other one is the personification of whiteness. The Status Quo Negro is considered cool because he embraces his rightful place within popular culture. He exploits the negative stereotypes made about him in an attempt to appear both desirable and accepted within society. Since he accepts his media made blackness, he is accepted by African American teens as a model to emulate and aspire to. On the other hand, the Social Outcast is considered "uncool" because he seemingly rejects his blackness, in favor of adopting stereotypical traits associated with white men. This rejection of blackness is therefore tantamount to racial treason. Since he rejects the stereotypical archetype that would render him "truly black", he is rejected and ridiculed by African American males who view him as a "sell out" to his race. For example, in the episode title "Blood is thicker than Mud", Will and Carlton decide to be initiated into the same Fraternity house, which is black owned and operated. The fraternity brothers like Will and offer him a place, while rejecting Carlton. Later in the episode we find out that the fraternity leader views Carlton as a "sell out" because he does not act like a black man ought to; referring to Carlton as "The brother from another planet".

The obvious questions to be asked are "How did this mentality among African American males establish itself, and why do most African American males view education, intellect, hard work, ambitions and over achieving as negative traits, while viewing ignorance, laziness, under achieving and trouble making as positive traits?" The simplest answer to this question is media. The media has the power to display any image it wants and since there are few people of color in power within the media, the representations it produces are often distorted (Leonard and Guerrero, 2013).

Over a prolonged period of time, these images embed themselves in our subconscious, slowly molding the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us. This programming is the most potent when we are children and adolescents. In a time where children spend more time in front of a television screen than going

outside and in a time where the television has taken on the role of both the entertainer and babysitter for children, television itself can play a powerful role in determining dreams and impacting one's sense of self (Leonard and Guerrero, 2013).

This becomes an important factor when we consider the demographics, as it relates to who watches these kinds of sitcoms. For example, according to IMDB, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* is most enjoyed by males between the ages of 18-29, which would have made these voters adolescents or young teens at the time this show originally aired. Also, in a list titled "TV Shows Most Loved By African Americans", an online service called Ranked, surveyed over 13,000 African Americans to see what their favorite television shows were. What they discovered is that African Americans, aged under 30 ranked the following television shows in their top 5:

- 1st: *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*
- 2nd: *Family Matters*
- 3rd: *My Wife And Kids*
- 4th: *Martin*
- 5th: *The Cosby Show*

Interestingly enough, all of these shows utilize the Status Quo Negro archetype, while 3 out of the five utilize the Social Outcast archetype. Also, in the latest incarnation of the black family dynamic; another black sitcom titled *Black-ish* uses the Status Quo Negro archetype, manifested in the character of Andre Johnson, and the Social Outcast archetype, manifested in the character of Andre's eldest son Andre Johnson Jr.

F. HEGEMONY & IDEOLOGY

Anthony Giddens argues that ideology encompasses groups based on race and that ideology means the organizing and justifying of ideas that groups hold about themselves and the world, while Antonio Gramsci argues that Ideology maps the meanings that support the power of particular groups, while at the same time providing people with rules of practical conduct and moral behaviour (Kitzmann 2016). These points are important when we deconstruct black situational comedies; more specifically the Status Quo Negro and the Social Outcast Archetypes, what lifestyle and values they are promoting and what image of the African American experience they present to the rest of the world. The following chart illustrates the type of character traits these archetypes have to demonstrate the negative ideologies at play.

Table 1. The Type of Character Traits

Status Quo Negro Archetypal Traits	Antonymous Archetypal Traits
Athletically gifted.	Intellectually gifted.
Personifies ‘black’ Hip Hop culture. Perceived as being violent, rebellious and ‘ghetto’.	Conforms to cultural norms of conformity. The good citizen.
Informal and not articulate. Uses ‘Ebonics’ (slang) when communicating.	Formal and articulate. Uses ‘proper’ English when communicating.
Womanizer who refuses to stay in a long term relationship.	Faithful and committed to maintaining long lasting relationships.
Does not abide by rules/laws.	Law abiding citizen.
Slacker/class clown/irresponsible/incompetent/underachiever.	Hard working/responsible/competent/overachiever.
Wastes natural talents/no long term goals.	Uses natural talents to better themselves/ has tangible goals.

These negative stereotypes become problematic not simply because they are false, but because they often stand in for real knowledge and actual life experience (Wilkerson, 1993). When stereotypes are constantly shown in the media, they tend to be believed by people who do not come into contact with African Americans frequently. Segregation in America ensures that many Caucasians and others do not have daily contact with African American communities. As a result, negative stereotypes in the media become associated with black culture, regardless of factual evidence to the contrary. Therefore, it should come as no surprise to anyone when stories of racism and racial profiling surface, by which a black man is seemingly targeted, simply because of the complexion of his skin, or why people of different ethnicities view African American males in such a negative way. Another unfortunate side effect of this bombardment of negative, African American, male, imagery is its effect on black communities. The Status Quo Negro archetype is designed in such a way, as to be appealing to African American youth. Essentially, black women want to date him and black men want to be like him. He looks like them, walks and talks like them, is interested in the same activities as them and seemingly shares in the same life experiences as the African American community. Therefore, most African American males identify with and emulate the Status Quo Negro archetype. As Professor Mark Anthony Neal from Duke University states, stereotypes are used to “keep black people in their place by reinforcing the notion of their inferiority” (Lee, 2009). By enforcing these negative stereotypes, television ensures that any and all ideologies made about African American males are negative in nature.

What is interesting about this power relationship between the ‘elite’ and the African American community is that the bond between them that is symbiotic in nature. Corporations, fueled by consumerism use the media as a forum to sell products, aimed at the African American community. The Status Quo Negro essentially becomes the ‘celebrity expert’, in that he sells African American youth an image and/or lifestyle, via the use of product placement. The clothes he adorns, the shoes he wears, the music he listens to, and the electronics he uses become the ‘must have’ objects within the African American community. Black youth become mindless consumers, so obsessed with attaining the image of the Status Quo Negro, they forget their miserable condition in the ghettos of America. Instead of saving and investing their money in ventures that would produce positive, long term benefits, most black youth waste their money consuming products, in an attempt to attain a lifestyle that is impossible to achieve.

G. FINAL THOUGHTS

In a time where African American teens are inundated with imagery from the media that portrays negative traits as being cool, it is not surprising to see why most African American teens fall into the trap of ignorance. However, this bombardment not only manifests itself in black sitcoms. Popular black music, films and even literature all cater to the archetypes that promote negative stereotypes as something to aspire to. What sets black sitcoms apart from the rest of these media forms is that black sitcoms are more covert with issues of racism, as it relates to presenting black narratives. Other forms of media, like black popular music are not shy in exposing their intent in their lyrics and in their music videos. The black sitcom utilizes a facade of wholesomeness, under the guise of comedy to push a racist agenda that goes undetected by many of its viewers. We are a society that is largely image literate, which makes the television a powerful tool that fosters awareness of self, and since television dulls our ability to think critically, it has the power to instil false predicates that are believed by the masses as being true. These false predicates are largely dependent on our inability to differentiate between that which is factual and that which is not. This idea is echoed by Marshall McLuhan, who states that media can create different types of awareness and that the “literate man” can look upon this awareness objectively and discern whether it is a true depiction or not, while the “television personality” has no objectivity at all. Since the media consistently blurs the lines between reality and fiction, it becomes increasingly difficult for society to recognise these covert, false narratives, and even harder to expose said narratives, since it is the same media that controls all the outlets by which the truth can be shared on massive scales.

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