Part III

RACE, ETHNICITY, AND INTERSECTIONALITY
Historically, African Americans have had a tumultuous relationship with mass media. This history has been well documented by scholars (Bogle 2001a; Bogle 2001b; Campbell 1995; Campbell, LeDuff, Jenkins, and Brown 2012; Dates and Barlow 1993; Gray 1995; Haggins 2008; Hunt 2005; Jackson 2006). Many of the images that populated early popular culture were primitive and stereotypical. The images were found in books, newspapers, magazines, and cartoons, and they were prevalent during the nineteenth century in minstrel shows and vaudeville performances—two of the more common forms of popular entertainment of that era. These caricatures set the tone for how blacks were ultimately depicted in film, radio, advertising, and television news and entertainment programming, and can largely be characterized as negative. These portrayals have often reflected the attitudes held about blacks in American society (Nelson 2008). According to Campbell and Giannino, “The ruling class has a long history of using exaggerated media images to demean marginal groups and bolster its privileged status within the existing power structure” (2011: 110). In essence, the use of historical, controlling images reaffirms dominant ideology and maintains the status quo.

While the quantity of representation of African Americans has fluctuated over the years, the quality of the images remains an area of concern. Harper (1998) suggests that a primary reason that the representation of African Americans has been a concern is because it is thought to have an impact “that extends beyond the domain of signs as such and into the realm of African Americans’ material well-being, which comprises, among other factors, the social relations through which black people’s status in the country is conditioned” (62). Thus, media representations of African Americans can have residual effects in their everyday lived experiences beyond popular culture in the form of discrimination and the establishment of public policies aimed at controlling black and brown bodies (Collins 2004; Harper 1998; Harris-Perry 2011; Pozner 2010).

Despite changes in contemporary mass media and, especially, the televisual landscape (which has more outlets as a result of cable/satellite, niche programming, and more content being created by people of color), in many instances, the themes and characters continue to reinforce hegemonic ideas and stereotypes. It can be argued that television is distinguishable from other media with regard to its ability to disseminate harmful stereotypes. Nelson (2008) noted that compared to film and other media, television dispersed images “more rapidly—and more democratically, because audiences chose what to watch” (194). Furthermore, according to Dates and Barlow (1990), “American
commercial television is a clear reflection of the split in the African American image in popular culture, and of empowered groups’ rigid control of most images presented on the television screen” (267). Gray (1995) and Nelson (1998) suggest that the representations of African Americans have been greatly impacted by the politics of the television production process, which is rooted in dominant ideology. In many instances, this dominant ideology privileges a white, male, middle-class perspective even when African Americans are involved in the process as writers, directors, and producers because they typically “operate under the creative control and direction of white studio and network executives” (Gray 1995: 71). Even though African Americans may be involved at various stages of the production process, they do not always have the final say and can have their ideas rejected or overruled by executives who hold more power.

This chapter examines African-American representations in the mass media, primarily by exploring how they have been portrayed in reality television, a quintessential form of contemporary pop culture. First, an overview of categories of African-American television representation based on the work of Herman Gray and Angela M. S. Nelson is provided. Next, media stereotypes of African Americans and the reality television genre are discussed. Then, literature examining reality television shows featuring diverse casts, predominantly African-American casts, and African-American families are reviewed. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications and possibilities for the future of African-American media representations.

Categories of African-American Media Representations

Nelson (1998/2008), influenced by Gray’s (1995) analysis of discursive practices in media representations of African Americans, classifies four significant racial humor categories that characterize that representation in television sitcoms: Hybrid Minstrelsy and Black Employment (1948–65); Assimilationist Minstrelsy and Black Glamour (1961–1973); Assimilated Hybrid Minstrelsy (1972–1983); and Multiculturalism, Simultaneity, and Diversification (1984–2008). According to Nelson (2008), the hybrid minstrelsy and black-employment era (1948–1965) featured “black sitcom characters in stereotypical and subservient roles” (194). She cites five prevalent stereotypes associated with this period: sambo (happy, lazy men), coon (subhuman men), mammy (servant/mother), oriole (similar to the dumb blond), and sapphire (domineering woman). The assimilationist minstrelsy and black glamour category (1961–1973) cited by Nelson included shows that treated “the social and political issues of black presence in particular, and racism in general, as individual problems” (196). These shows featured “acceptable Negroes” who were comfortable in white worlds and who reinforced and reflected mainstream values. The black lady and black buddy images Collins (2004) identifies are representative of the images that emerged during this period that were in large part “based on Julia Baker, from Julia and Chet Kincaid, from The Bill Cosby Show” (Nelson 2008: 197). The assimilated hybrid minstrelsy era (1972–1983) described by Nelson concerns shows that featured “black and white characters that are just alike, except for minor differences of habit and racial perspective” (Nelson 2008: 197). Nelson indicates that this period featured recycled minstrel era caricatures as well as some new and updated versions of the old negative images. Nelson writes that the representations that fall within the multicultural, simultaneity, and diversification category (1984–2008)
provide an African-American take on what it means to be American and does so by offering multiple African-American identities and perspectives; in essence, it features multidimensional characters and is inventive in its approach to the medium. However, Nelson also acknowledges that some of the programming prevalent during this era also featured historical arch stereotypes as well as updated stereotypes.

**Stereotypes, African Americans, and Reality Television**

Arch stereotypes such as the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire have commonly been associated with African-American women while the tom, sambo, coon, and buck/brute have been associated with African-American men (Boggle 2001; Dates and Barlow 1990; Nelson 2008). The tropes and archetype caricatures that have been associated with African Americans historically are also prevalent within the reality television genre, in programs created by non-blacks and blacks alike. The cast members embody characteristics of arch stereotypes, modified stereotypes, and stereotypes that possess qualities of more than one arch or modified stereotype. Scholars have noted the legacy of minstrelsy and controlling images in a number of reality television programs (Orbe 1998; Orbe and Hopson 2002; Andrejevic and Colby 2006; Bell-Jordan 2008; Dubrofsky and Hardy 2008; Goldman 2012; Harris and Goldman 2014; Piriano 2013; Tyree 2011; Smith 2013; Bennett 2014). Prevalent tropes and stereotypes of African Americans that are present in reality television programming include both (1) violent, hypersexual, materialistic, angry, aggressive, and unstable black men and women, and (2) the savage/brute, coon, sambo, pimp, hustler, jezebel, gold-digger, freak/hoochie, sapphire, diva, homo thug (Stephens and Phillips 2003; Andrejevic and Colby 2006; Bell-Jordan 2008; Campbell and Giannino 2011; Collins 2004, Dubrofsky and Hardy 2008; Orbe 1998; Orbe and Hopson 2002; Piraino 2013; Tyree 2011). Pozner (2010) indicates that reality television is ideologically persuasive as well as entertaining. As such, Campbell and Giannino maintain that it perpetuates “ruling-class ideologies that value men’s power over women, white sensibilities over marginalized ways of knowing and opulence over modesty” (2011: 104).

Even though there have been attempts to produce something different, or in the case of reality television show reality or how real people handle real situations, negative representations continue to permeate because beliefs and perceptions are steeped in an ideology that is difficult to break away from. These beliefs and perceptions are inevitably influenced by the experiences those involved in the production process have had with television and other forms of mass media. Thus, it is possible that what some believe or think about African Americans is based on how they have been portrayed in media.

**Reality TV Shows Featuring Diverse Casts**

Pozner (2010) indicates the casts of early reality television programs (in the 1990s through the early 2000s) were mostly white, and when persons of color were featured they were marginalized, portrayed as a token character, and/or were in recurring roles. For instance, she contends that they tended to portray African-American women in stereotypical roles she described as black bitches, entitled divas, angry black women, hoochie mamas, ghetto girls, and mammies (Pozner 2010). Research has found that reality programs with diverse casts tend to privilege whiteness and African-American
cast members tend to reinforce hegemonic notions of blackness (Andrejevic and Colby 2008; Dubrofsky and Hardy 2010; Pozner 2010). Dubrofsky and Hardy (2010) indicate that whiteness is understood as that which is normal or familiar and that it is privileged because it is often void of obvious signifiers. They submit that within reality television shows with predominantly white casts, black cast members are expected to claim an identity, which often involves embodying a stereotypical representation of blackness and, if they do not, they are deemed inauthentic.

Orbe and Hopson (2002) examined MTV’s *The Real World* and indicated that “the signifiers associated with Black men on the show reflect general stereotypes found in all aspects of U.S. popular culture” (220). They found that black males portrayed on the show fell into one of four categories: inherently angry, emotionally unstable or unpredictable, a violent threat, or sexually aggressive. All of these signifiers or character traits can be traced back to the historically controlling image of the African–American man as the savage brute. Later representations might be closer to what Collins (2004) refers to as the criminal, thug, and/or player. These representations reinforce hegemonic notions that imply that black men are inherently violent, dangerous, and hypersexual and should be feared. Additionally, Andrejevic and Colby (2008) argue that Gladys, the only black cast member of the 1999 season of MTV’s *Road Rules*, was cast with the expectation that she would “perform a certain racial stereotype”: that of the “angry black woman” (200). They suggest that she was depicted as rough, urban, and almost always defensive, and that “she always posed the threat of violence” (203). Moreover, Tyree (2011) found that in reality programming featuring mostly white casts, African Americans “were often triggers or catalysts in arguments, disagreements, and physical altercations . . . and were more likely than not to be stereotyped” (408). Likewise, Goldman (2012) indicated that African–American women featured in reality shows with diverse casts were, in large part, featured less often and in the background unless they were exhibiting stereotypical qualities such as the mean black woman or the sexualized black woman; in these instances, Goldman found, they were given more camera time.

Bell-Jordan (2008) also examined reality television shows with diverse casts. She asserts that the shows reinforce ideological assumptions about race in ways similar to television news:

> The narratives about race on these shows can be understood as similar in five prevailing ways to how race is mediated in television news: (1) they dramatize race and racial issues by juxtaposing opposing viewpoints; (2) they promote conflict in the framing of race and racial issues, specifically in terms of interracial conflict and intra-racial conflict; (3) they perpetuate hegemonic representations of race by emphasizing violence and anger; (4) they personalize racism by privileging individual solutions to complex social problems; and (5) they leave conflict and contradictions unresolved.

Bell-Jordan contends that race is used as a textual device on the programs and that the portrayals seem to strengthen hegemonic "reductive thinking about African Americans as either ‘hood or ‘integrated’ (that is ‘acceptable or ‘unacceptable’)” (360). Within this framework, there is little room for audiences to imagine or recognize the diversity among African Americans. In essence, white cast members’ poor behavior is characterized or perceived as situational or specific to the individual whereas black cast members’ behaviors
are seen (and constructed) as natural or innate. Bell-Jordan’s observations regarding the similarities between television news and reality television shows and their construction of race are quite telling, particularly the notion that they perpetuate hegemonic representations of race by emphasizing violence and anger.

Andrejevic and Colby (2006) suggest one of the draws of reality television is that ideally it offers audiences who are also potential cast members the opportunity to challenge stereotypes and determine how they will be represented. They argue that shows such as MTV’s *The Real World* and *Road Rules* have largely been unsuccessful in debunking stereotypes in their depictions of black cast members as they have “tended to reinforce a litany of caricatures” (198). Like much of what is seen on television, reality programming featuring diverse (but majority-white) casts tends to reduce complex social and widespread problems to one of the individual, which supports the notion that problems related to race or racism are mostly isolated incidents and ignores the systemic and institutional racism that remains prevalent and impacts the life experiences of many people of color (Andrejevic and Colby 2006; Gray 1995). Thus, systemic racism and the continued oppression it causes are largely and conveniently ignored, as this would contradict the notion of a post-racial society. In this regard, these types of reality shows fit within the assimilationist minstrelsy and black glamour category in that they seem to treat “the social and political issues of black presence . . . and racism in general, as individual problems” (Nelson 2008: 196). However, the African-American cast members in these shows are not always accepted or made to feel comfortable in the manufactured environment.

**Reality Television Featuring Predominantly Black Casts**

Jennifer Pozner (2010) suggests the arrival of VH1’s *Flavor of Love* (2006) ushered in a paradigm shift in reality television programming, particularly where African Americans are concerned. She indicates non-whites became more visible within reality television; however, she maintains that shows featuring majority African-American casts were more like modern-day minstrel shows that included jezebels, pimps, and thugs. Additionally, Smith (2013) contends that stereotypes of African Americans found in reality television usually pertain to “sexuality (e.g., The Brute, The Jezebel), physical prowess (e.g., The Brute/The Criminal/The Nat/The Buck, The Athlete). They might also be presented as aggressive (e.g., The Matriarch/The Sapphire, The Brute/The Criminal/The Nat/The Buck), while others are described as docile (e.g., The Tom, The Sister Savior)” (41–42).

A litany of unflattering images has been identified in *Flavor of Love*. For example, Dubrofsky and Hardy (2008) found that rapper Flavor Flav, the show’s star, as well as the women featured on the show perform notions of blackness that are in alignment with dominant ideology, such as being hypersexual, overly emotional, angry, loud, and out of control, and that those representations ultimately reaffirmed long-held stereotypes of African Americans. Likewise, Campbell and Giannino (2011) draw parallels between the portrayal of Flavor Flav in *Flavor of Love* and the historically controlling image of the coon. They indicate that Flavor Flav embodied multiple characteristics of the coon and that he depicted a new-age coon, “the super coon.” According to Campbell and Giannino, “The gestation of the twenty-first century coon included an evolution whereby the caricature is objectified and commodified by the hegemonic strata which ultimately leads to the recreation/rebirth of today’s super-coon Flavor Flav” (106). Campbell and Giannino cite everything from his gaudy mansion, his attire, the foods he eats, and the manner in
which he eats to his poorly articulated thoughts and ideas as examples of how he has elevated the coon and reinvented the minstrel tradition. Furthermore, they maintain that his hyperbolic persona merely offers the illusion of power whereas he is actually powerless. This is demonstrated through his misogynistic treatment of the women appearing on the show, especially renaming them based on some aspect of their appearance (Campbell and Giannino 2011). The renaming ritual is particularly problematic as it harkens back to slavery and how slaves’ names were changed. In essence, he mimics the oppressors. Campbell and Giannino explain that this “not only highlights the powerlessness of the women . . . but also elucidates the pseudo power ascribed to the super coon who can oppress others by rendering them nameless but cannot engage in the kind of intellectual and critical discourse necessary to confront a system that simultaneously renders him powerless” (109). *Flavor of Love* can be situated in Nelson’s assimilated hybrid minstrelsy category because it imitates *The Bachelor* thematically, yet it clearly features recycled minstrel era caricatures such as the coon, sapphire, and the hypersexual jezebel.

Goldman (2012) indicates that African-American women are portrayed positively and negatively in reality shows in which they are the majority (i.e., *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Basketball Wives*, and *Love & Hip Hop*). In terms of positive depictions, she found that they portray professionals and good mothers, that they are physically attractive (outside of mainstream standards), in healthy relationships, and not always hypersexual. However, Goldman maintains that the amount of negative portrayals prevalent in the shows she analyzed generally outweighed the positive ones. Negative characteristics exhibited by the cast members included being mean, aggressive, and hypersexual. Furthermore, Goldman (2012) observed that some of the positive attributes that were found were featured in the cast biographies and not necessarily emphasized within the storylines. Additionally, Bennett (2014) examined *Love & Hip Hop Atlanta* to interrogate reality television’s representation of black women and men, the manner in which black men employ male privilege, and how black women subvert male privilege in the context of the show. He found that the representations reinforce and reproduce harmful stereotypes of African Americans. Bennett indicates that female cast members embody characteristics of the sapphire and jezebel, and male cast members support the mythological notions of black men as hypersexual, violent, emotionally unstable, and uneducated/irresponsible (Hopson and Orbe 2002; Jackson 2006). On the other hand, Bennett found that the women on the show were also depicted as “caring mothers, compassionate friends, and strong independent women” (55). He further suggests that there are positive qualities attached to the black men on the show that might be overlooked as well:

> At times, Black men embody vulnerability by expressing their emotions, such as love, in relationships with the women in their lives. This space of emotional vulnerability and communal bonding is where *Love & Hip Hop Atlanta* deviates from traditional representations of Black femininity and Black masculinity on television. (Bennett 2014: 55)

Goldman (2012) and Bennett (2014) seem to read against the encoding of the dominant ideology present in reality television. Their analysis reveals that African Americans are being depicted with more complexity, particularly when the cast is composed mostly of African Americans. Given the multidimensional personas of some of the cast members in the shows they examined, it is plausible to situate those programs in Nelson’s (2008)
multicultural, simultaneity, and diversification category. On the other hand, the shows also promote mainstream values and sensibilities while reaffirming hegemonic notions of African Americans being aggressive and hypersexual black men and women (particularly on *Love & Hip Hop Atlanta*), in alignment with Nelson’s (2008) assimilated hybrid minstrelsy category.

### The Black Family in Reality TV: From Black Fatherhood to Black Motherhood

Smith (2011) examined reality television’s portrayal of black fathers by juxtaposing *Run’s House* and Snoop Dogg’s *Father Hood* with *The Cosby Show*. Among the similarities she aptly highlights are that none of the three shows outwardly addresses racism, classism, or societal ills; instead, the shows revolve “around family success, humor, and harmony” (470). The most notable contrast observed among the three shows concerned the fathers’ approach to disciplining their children. Smith notes that *The Cosby Show* and *Run’s House* were similar in that they both operated from a more traditional parenting paradigm and both the parents and the children expressed their feelings during family discussions. On the other hand, Snoop was much more laidback and was not much of a disciplinarian; however, his wife, like the wives on *The Cosby Show* and *Run’s House*, was. Fatherhood also distinguished itself as real-life issues such as sex were addressed, and the show purposefully highlighted the ties the Broadus family maintained with Snoop’s old neighborhood. Smith indicates that *Run’s House* and *Father Hood* are prone to reinforcing enlightened racism, similar to *The Cosby Show* (Jhally and Lewis 2005). She writes,

> First, all three shows display professional and material success in environments void of race-based obstacles. Two, the two reality sitcoms, viewed as more “real” than traditional sitcoms, lend credence to the belief of the [raceless] American Dream. Third, reality TV—like *The Cosby Show*—has proven its ability to attract diverse audiences, which increases opportunities for White exposure to Black fathers/families.

*(Smith 2011: 477)*

She also observes that both shows reinforce the stereotype that success or achievement for African Americans is most acceptable through entertainment—such as music or sports—that affirms hegemonic ideals. It seems worth noting that Calvin Broadus (Snoop) has a criminal background and, although it has not seemingly hindered his success or earning potential, it does reinforce the myth that black men are inherently criminal. However, his success is not a likely outcome for the countless African-American men and women whose lives have been permanently changed due to criminal convictions and the associated stigma. Likewise, during one of the episodes, his sons have a run-in with the law after illegally parking one of Snoop’s cars they did not have permission to drive (Smith 2011). It is possible that without the protection of Snoop’s celebrity status, there could very well have been a different outcome. This was a teachable moment missed by Snoop and the show’s other producers.

Goldman (2014) examined reality television portrayals of African-American female celebrities that revolved around their families: *Braxton Family Values* and *Mary Mary*. Her analysis revealed that both shows featured professional, family-oriented women and, while both contained elements of anger and sexuality, these were neither over-the-top
nor a primary characteristic of the cast members. Instead, Goldman indicates that their behavior was displayed purposefully and in context, particularly in their attempts to resolve conflict, which they often did successfully. She concluded:

> The shows present Black women who are ambitious and successful. They possess strong mothering skills and know the difference between hypersexuality and acceptable sexuality. In addition, their use of aggression is purposeful and to protect others. The women are not solely presented as one specific stereotype. Instead, they are featured as multifaceted women who experience several highs as well as lows. Thus, more positive images of Black women in reality television can and do exist. 

*(Goldman 2014: 49)*

Goldman points to these shows as evidence that television can still entertain audiences without exploiting black women, depicting them as angry and hypersexual.

The reality shows revolving around African-American families seem to be situated within Nelson’s multicultural, simultaneity, and diversification category by offering multiple African-American identities and perspectives. However, like *The Cosby Show*, they “operate in a world that parallels that of whites” and appeal to mainstream values such as “mobility and individualism” as well as privileging “the upper-middle-class black family” (Gray 1995: 89). In this regard, the shows also fit within assimilationist and pluralist discourses described by Gray (1995).

**Reality TV and the Future of African-American Media Representations**

Reviewing the literature concerning African-American representation on reality television reveals that both historical and revised media stereotypes are reinforced and reproduced through this genre. With this in mind, much of reality television bears a striking resemblance to the “Blaxploitation” films and ghetto sitcoms of the 1970s. They are largely enjoyed by black audiences and simultaneously reinforce hegemonic ideas and beliefs about African Americans. Much like the sitcom, reality television is formulaic and has a tendency to reinforce dominant beliefs rather than challenge them. Thus, “the excessive sexualized discourse and hyperbolic ghetto attitude is personified as authentically black and far removed from the normative nature of Whiteness, erecting the parameters of Blackness in the space” of reality TV (Dubrofsky and Hardy 2008: 386). Furthermore, Bennett (2014) posits that reality television shows—like many mass media artifacts—“offer opportunities to exploit marginalized communities for ratings and drama” in an attempt to maximize profits (1). He goes on to suggest that reality television has treated the black body as a commodity while reinforcing dominant ideology, as many of the shows “center intersecting privileged and marginalized identities to promote conflict surrounding Black cast members at the expense of offering humanizing representations of Black culture” (19). According to Pozner, reality television

has the power to influence our notions of normalcy versus difference, convince us that certain behaviors are “innate” for different groups of people, and present culturally constructed norms of gender, race, class and sexuality as “natural” rather than performances we’ve learned to adopt through societal education and expectation.

*(2010: 98)*
Tyree suggests that even though much of reality television is staged, some perceive the performances as authentic and this could potentially impact interactions audience members have with African Americans in real life (2011: 409). Additionally, Smith maintains that though reality TV “might offer the possibility for those featured to construct their own identities, editing techniques and producers’ decisions often override these potentialities” (2013: 47).

What might be most troubling about this, however, is that this is the case even when the executives behind the shows—and behind many problematic media representations—are African-American men and women. This underscores the pervasiveness of dominant ideology and the interlocking forces of white supremacy and capitalism. When African Americans reproduce these damaging images, internalized racism in conjunction with the financial rewards made possible by capitalist enterprises are the likely cause. For some African Americans, becoming a part of the media elite ultimately leads to continuing the negative media legacy. In some instances, when African Americans are in charge of creating and circulating their own images, all too often the images reinforce hegemonic racist and sexist notions about black women and men (Stephens and Phillips 2003).

Although some progress has been made, as illustrated by the reality shows featuring African-American families, there is still a way to go as the positive portrayals are often overshadowed by the negative imagery prevalent in the media landscape. Ultimately, the goal should be to have more television programming and other media products that align with Nelson’s (2008) multicultural, simultaneity, and diversification category, and there is evidence of that as discussed above; however, it is difficult for content creators to avoid falling back on the familiar, as illustrated with the shows that continue to recycle stereotypes in the minstrelsy tradition.

This chapter reviewed literature concerning mass media representations of African Americans through the lens of reality television. It did not attempt to address all mass media (or even all reality television programming) but used reality television as a lens through which to view the problematic representations of African Americans throughout the history of popular culture. Much work is still needed in producing better, well-rounded, and realistic—not perfect—media images of African Americans, and this is possible, as seen occasionally in reality television and in other forms of mass media.

References


Further Reading


