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Televsual Representation and the Claims
of "the Black Experience"

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The Complex Effects of Televsual Representation

Let me begin with two propositions that I think can serve as generally acceptable premises for the analysis that follows. The first is that the representation of black people on U.S. network television has been a highly contested phenomenon since at least the days of *Amos 'n' Andy*; the second, which has ramifications for the significance of the first, is that "representation" is an extremely complex affair, the intricacies of which we have only begun to theorize in the context of African American cultural studies.¹

It is, I think, safe to say that one of the reasons the televsual representation of black people has for so long served as a focus of debate is that it is seen as having effects that extend 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 this country is conditioned. The standard of simulacral realism that has informed popular demands for greater representation of blacks on tv is rooted in the assumption that such representation would improve the objective conditions characterizing daily life for the mass of African Americans living within the scope of television's influence.

For anyone engaged in critical cultural studies, the suggestion that representation conditions or shapes "reality" is hardly novel. We cannot hope, however, to construct an effective critique of the racial politics of popular culture until this rather elementary proposition is more fully elaborated to account for some of the specific ways that such conditioning occurs, which, since representation is itself a complex phenomenon, will most likely be complex as well, often counterintuitive at the least, and very possibly contradictory. Those contradictions are apt to emerge, it seems to me, not just as we consider various *televisual productions either across different historical periods or within the same time frame*, but even in the context of a single production; and they are likely to indicate not merely the complexity of any given show or series per se but also the highly overdetermined nature of the historical context in which that show or series is produced. To get just a slight sense of such contextual overdetermination for the 1960s and early 1970s—on which period I want to focus in particular—let us examine not a television show itself, but some commentary *about* television that will elucidate some of the claims that I have already made.

One commentator illuminates especially well the issues at stake in the debate about blacks in television that took place during the period in question. As a regular columnist for the *Saturday Review*, Robert Lewis Shayon reliably chronicled the technological, institutional, and generic developments that occurred in broadcasting from the early 1960s through the 1970s. More than this, though, he also incisively analyzed the social significance of such developments and offered thoughtful critiques of various aspects of industry practice. In particular, Shayon was a consistent critic of the treatment of blacks on television, and he had a clear idea of why changes in that treatment were necessary. In November 1962, for example, Shayon extolled television's yet unrealized capacity to "communicat[e] . . . the Negro image to millions of homes," suggesting that the broad dissemination of that "image" would help improve blacks' social standing in the world beyond the television screen.² Three months later, in February 1963, Shayon elaborated this idea in a flat-out declaration: "If Negroes were seen more frequently on television—and in featured roles comparable to those played by white actors—their real-life employment picture might be favorably affected. Television's power to change mass habits and attitudes appears to be significant. An improvement in the Negro image on television might be a very important step toward real integration."³

The middle of the decade saw Shayon still holding to this notion of television's potential effect on lived social relations. In October 1966, he opined that "a sharing of power in the real world can flow from entertainment images of mutual accommodation" and that "[t]elevision's fantasy world does more than provide entertainment: it structures a belief in what is possible in the real world."⁴ Through the end of the civil rights movement up to the dawn of the Black Power era, then, Robert Lewis Shayon maintained the conviction to which I refer above: that television can have a substantive effect on the social context in which it operates and that, as regards black people specifically, an *improvement in their social status can result from their mere depiction in mainstream television programming*. Such depictions would thus instantiate what, at the beginning of this essay, I call "simulacral realism," derived from the *theorizations of, among others, Jean Baudrillard, who has conceived the simulacrum as a representation that usurps the supposed primacy of the "real" object conventionally understood to serve as its "original."*⁵ Inasmuch as televisual depictions are imagined to have a powerful socially constitutive effect—in Shayon's terms, actually setting the stage for the realization in the "real" world of the scenarios presented on the screen—they closely approximate to the simulacral function that Baudrillard has elucidated. I will have more to say about the standard of simulacral realism later. First, though, it is important to note another aspect of Shayon's commentary that is highly significant for our consideration here.

At the same time that Shayon argued the progressive social impact that would be made by televisual images of "mutual accommodation" (and we should remember that it is by no means certain that such images necessarily *do* have a progressive effect),⁶ he also identified another potential result of increased representation of blacks on television, thus indicating the profound complexity of the issues under discussion. In the same November 1962 column cited above, in which he called for the widespread "communication" of the "Negro image," Shayon commented on the just-released findings of the Committee on Integration of the New York Society for Ethical Culture. Having monitored the programming of the three major TV networks from 8:00 A.M. to midnight over a two-week period, the Committee found that only about 22 percent of it featured any appearances by blacks at all, and that a plurality of that 22 percent presented blacks only as singers, dancers, or musicians. Although this data was clearly pertinent to a consideration of the broad social

significance of blacks' televisual representation, Shayon also deployed it to address a more specific concern: "the employment of Negro actors" and blacks' general potential for material success within the industry.

Indeed, in his discussion, after reporting the Committee's findings regarding the preponderance of musical acts among black television performers, Shayon immediately raises the topic of these performers' financial welfare, noting that "it would be instructive to know how many performers had permanency of employment. The Negro singer or dancer on television is a transient, an itinerant, with no chance of earning his living exclusively in either the black and white or the color tube." Shayon goes on to remark that "people appearing as themselves" on news broadcasts, informational programs, and educational documentaries—which constituted the category of programming with the second highest frequency of appearances by blacks, according to the Committee's study—"are again merely passing through—usually without benefit of any fee."

This observation is cogent and suggestive. It is absolutely true, for one thing, that a primary, though often elided, stake in televisual representation—in 1962 no less than today—is money and, particularly, the financial interests of those corporate entities with monetary investment in the programming. These interests, it almost goes without saying, are only rarely, if ever, congruent with the concerns about "image" that we normally associate with the critique of the treatment of blacks on television. Thus, for Shayon to raise the question of the performer's financial position—leaving aside the historically, socially, and culturally fraught issue of pay rate, the astronomic scale of which for post-1960s entertainment "superstars" is a topic for a whole other extensive discussion—is for him to enact a crucial shift in analytical perspective whereby not only is financial interest granted its proper position in the discussion of industry politics, but the status of the "exploited worker," to use that crude and evidently problematic term, is granted its proper centrality with respect to that interest. Shayon's sophisticated understanding of the complex issue of equity in the business is indicated in his continued discussion in the column I am citing, which considers the effect on black television performers' financial success of various rapid developments in the burgeoning field—among them the advent of corporate sponsorship for programs and the establishment of talent unions and with them regularized pay scales.

More pertinent for our consideration here, however—indicating as it does

the potentially complex effect of televisual representation—is the link Shayon draws between the relatively small financial take for blacks in television and their relatively frequent TV appearances “as themselves,” for this link suggests a similar and converse connection between blacks’ financial success and their television appearances specifically as persons *other than* themselves. In other words, although Shayon’s advocacy for “[a]n improvement in the Negro image on television,” which I cited earlier, implies that such an improvement will bring about certain presumably positive social developments—racial integration, for instance, and the erosion of stereotypes about black people among whites who would otherwise not become familiar with them—his rhetoric here indicates that more immediate material gain by blacks in the field depends not upon the televisual dissemination of an exemplary image of singular black integrity, but rather on black performers’ projection of *multiplicitous* images that do not coincide with their “real-life” identities.

This fact is readily explicable, of course; it is a function of the difference between the incomes enjoyed by actors in regular fictional series, on the one hand, and by musicians, dancers, and persons appearing on “factual programs,” on the other, whereby the former make significantly more money than the latter. My specific concern, however, is not the objective intelligibility of this income differential, but rather its association specifically with acting in regular fictional series, in which its activity seems actually to *implicate* it as a factor in social stratification within a segment of the black populace. Televisual representation of African Americans thus potentially has at least a dual effect, according to Shayon’s logic: The mere appearance of black performers on television can further the *integration* of blacks generally throughout the society as a whole; on the other hand, their *acting* in fictional series also specifically entails a process of social *differentiation* within the black populace. This dual effect of blacks’ televisual representation may help to explain the vexed nature of discussion about it among African Americans themselves during the period under consideration.

The Dual Interests of the Black Performer

A particularly economical way of discerning this complexity is to consider comments made not by journalistic observers or “average people”—though I will turn to such comments shortly—but rather by actual black performers, whose remarks often indicate what we might call the divided interest that they



Bill Cosby and Robert Culp in *I Spy*. Photo courtesy of Photofest.

experience with respect to the representation of blacks on TV. A prime personage with whom to begin our consideration is Bill Cosby, not only because of the “superstardom” he achieved during the 1980s and early 1990s through the success of his NBC series, *The Cosby Show*, but also because of his “pioneer” status in the television industry; he was, after all, the first African American to star in a dramatic series on network television, appearing alongside Robert Culp in the show *I Spy*, which debuted on NBC in 1965. Among the spate of print publicity that accompanied that debut was a feature in *Ebony* magazine in which Cosby made a statement that simultaneously indicated his belief in the unique contribution that the show could make to improved U.S. race relations and his sense of solidarity with other blacks involved in the civil rights struggle: “Negroes like Martin Luther King and Dick Gregory; Negro groups like the Deacons and the Muslims—all are dedicated to the cause of civil rights, but they do their jobs in their own way. My way is to show white people that Negroes are human beings with the same aspirations and abilities that whites have.”⁷

At the same time, however, the unabashed statements Cosby made (and has continued to make) about his primary career objective suggest the possible mitigation of that solidarity by means of the very status with which he had been conferred in the industry context. A 1965 *Saturday Evening Post* profile



Diahann Carroll and Marc Copage in a publicity still from *Julia*. Photo courtesy of Photofest.

provided a summary of the stand-up comedy experience that preceded Cosby's being hired for *I Spy*, and indicated his plans for the future:

If he clicks in the show [which, at the time of the article's publication, was just beginning its first season], Cosby hopes to phase permanently out of nightclub humor into tv heroics, for one simple reason—money. And he plans to retire from all strenuous activity within 10 years, when he expects to have saved a cool million dollars. “That doesn’t mean I don’t care about the show,” he says. “I’d be upset if I looked like a dodo on that tv screen. But I’ve got no great artistic ambitions. What show business mainly means to me is cash. . . .”⁸

This sentiment was repeated in a *TV Guide* interview from the following month, in which Cosby bluntly asserted, “Money is of the utmost importance to me”; he mused further, “If this series goes five years, I will be only 33 and rich.”⁹

Similar dual references to the capacity of African Americans’ televisual representation to improve U.S. social conditions generally and to the specific benefit enjoyed by the performers engaged in such representation were manifested in the press reports attending the emergence, three years after *I Spy*,

of *Julia*, the notorious NBC series starring Diahann Carroll as a young black war widow raising her son in a racially integrated setting.¹⁰ In one of numerous pieces in which Carroll angrily defended the series against charges that it did not deal realistically with the exigencies of contemporary black life, she invoked the notion of simulacral realism that I discuss above, asserting television's socially constitutive function by insisting that "The plusses for *Julia* are so obvious that they almost don't bear discussion. Those who are liberal—who already have Negro friends—are in the minority. TV reaches the whole country, offering everybody constant contact with this woman and her child."¹¹ Two paragraphs later, however, having noted producer Hal Kanter's suggestion that *Julia* could further—precisely by *depicting*—blacks' integration into "the mainstream of American life," the same article observes that

Diahann [*sic*] has made a life for herself that is considerably better than the mainstream. She rents a handsome three-bedroom furnished house in Beverly Hills; it came complete with gardens, swimming pool and a grey Bentley. That is in keeping with Diahann's tastes. . . .

. . . Diahann's clothes are by Donald Brooks and Scaasi. In restaurants she asks the wine steward for Lafite-Rothschild '55. . . .

The text is accompanied by a photograph of Carroll posed in front of her Bentley on the lot of the 20th Century-Fox studios.

Despite the clear dualism of their relation to the medium, there is no duplicity at work in either Cosby's or Carroll's characterization of their activities within the television industry; on the contrary, in a 1970 interview with *TV Guide* that Shayon quoted in his *Saturday Review* column, Carroll stated forthrightly that she was doing *Julia* for "money and power [because] money is power in this country, and power means freedom . . . to do what I want to do."¹² What is clear, however, is that the power to which Carroll refers, and, particularly, the financial success through which it is achieved, set her apart from the majority of U.S. citizens generally, and certainly from African Americans, as the beneficiary of a process of social differentiation that can only be conceived in terms of class, in the dual sense of that word. Moreover, it is precisely intraracial distinctions of class that become particularly problematic in considerations of the televisual representation of black people as both the medium and debate about it develop through the 1960s and early 1970s.

Two Kinds of Realism and Their Social Implications

I have already elaborated the concept of simulacral realism that both Diahann Carroll and Robert Lewis Shayon evidently embrace, according to which television propounds scenarios that might subsequently (and consequently) be realized throughout the larger social field, regardless of whether they actually preexist there.¹³ At the same time, however, many of the critiques issued by the late 1960s and early 1970s implied a demand, not for simulacral realism, but rather for a properly *mimetic* realism—typically referenced in terms of “relevance” in the pertinent discussions¹⁴—whereby television would “reflect” the social reality on which it was implicitly modeled. Insofar as they diverge, these differing demands for simulacral and mimetic realism might be taken to indicate distinct concerns with the soundness of society generally, in the case of the former, and the psychological well-being of blacks specifically, in the case of the latter. The degree to which televisual mimetic “reflection” has been conceived as a prime factor in black people’s sense of psychic identity is indicated in the rhetoric of a 1970 commentary by African American writer John Oliver Killens. Killens, a novelist and critic whose work of the period was informed by the nationalist politics of the contemporaneous Black Arts movement,¹⁵ noted that, through the mid-1960s, a black person could “stare at television and go to an occasional movie and go through the routine from day to day, month to month, and year to year and hardly (if ever) see himself reflected in the cultural media. It was as if he had no real existence, as if he were a figment of his own imagination, or, at best, if he had an existence it wasn’t worth reflecting or reflection.”¹⁶ Killens goes on to admit that, at the point at which he is writing, “progress *has* been made, in that there are more actors employed in the medium.”¹⁷ This development, however, which represents the industry’s progress toward meeting Shayon’s 1962 demand on behalf of black performers’ financial interests, is not sufficient in Killens’s view, in which a preliminary demand for television’s reflection of individual black subjectivity—measured in the mere *quantity* of images of African Americans appearing on TV—must give way to a call for its reflection of authentic African American social experience, evidenced in the specific *quality* of the images presented on the screen.

By the time Killens’s article appeared, *Julia* had been joined on the tube by a notable few other programs that featured black performers, including *The Bill Cosby Show*, in which Cosby, in a transition from the now defunct *I Spy*, portrayed a high school basketball coach; *The Leslie Uggams Show*, an hour-long

variety program; and *Room 222*, a classroom "comedy-drama," to which I want to give sustained attention shortly. The problem with all of these programs, according to popular critiques, was that they weren't really "Black shows." As one black man interviewed by John Killens put it, "They're just shows with Black people acting like they White" or, to cite another of Killens's interviewees, "White folks masquerading in Black skin."¹⁸ In his own summation, Killens indicates his allegiance to the principle of mimetic realism that I have already outlined, charging that "the television establishment is attempting to give to the world the image of an integrated society in all facets of American life . . . , which is all well and good except that it is a colossal lie, because America is not an integrated society. It is a segregated society."¹⁹ And, although in this formulation Killens associates television's failure to mirror faithfully the conditions in which black people live their daily lives with its presentation of an integrated society that has no basis in "fact," later on in his piece he offers a slightly different account of what, really, is wrong with the televisual picture. Commenting specifically on *Room 222*, Killens asserts that "[t]he black folk here are full of understanding and wisdom, sympathetic all the way. No basic problems between the races. All men are brothers, right? An undramatic, middle-classish situation that hardly has anything to do with the Black experience."²⁰

In this rendering, the inauthenticity of televisual representation of black life is expressly identified with its presentation of a specifically "middle-class" situation in which "the Black experience" apparently cannot inhere, by definition. This fact indicates an interesting feature of Killens's critical position regarding television's treatment of blacks, whereby, on the one hand, concern for black performers' financial success and professional advancement—we might call it their social mobility—is simultaneously registered and bracketed (through Killens's fleeting recognition that "progress *has* been made . . . there are more actors employed in the medium"), while, on the other hand, the call for authenticity is manifested precisely in the demand that the black characters *portrayed* in the medium demonstrate no such socioeconomic advantage.

Paradoxically, therefore, the insistence that television faithfully represent a set of social conditions conceived by Killens and others as composing a singular and unitary phenomenon known as "the Black experience" runs smack up against a simultaneous demand that it both recognize and help constitute the diversity of African American society. The tension inherent in this situation was vividly expressed in the debut of *The Leslie Uggams Show*, in which Uggams exhorted her presumably white audience to recognize that "not all

black people look alike. I'm not Diahann Carroll. I'm not Julia." At that moment, Marc Copage, the young boy who played Corey, Julia's son in Diahann Carroll's series, ran onto the stage toward Uggams, arms outstretched, calling "Mama, mama!"²¹ The shock of this gag inheres, I think, in its simultaneous chastisement about the conceptualization of black people in a monolithic stereotype and its exposure of profound anxieties about the political ramifications of actually instantiating difference among African American subjects. Thus, if *Room 222* upsets John Killens, I would suggest that, the ostensible import of his protest notwithstanding, this is precisely because it works to negotiate an intraracial social difference that is seen as potentially disruptive to the political solidarity of the African American community.

***Room 222* and the Differentiation of Black Society**

Room 222 ran on ABC-TV from September 17, 1969, through January 11, 1974. Generally a critical success, it won the Emmy Award for Outstanding New Series of the 1969–70 season. In that same season, Karen Valentine and Michael Constantine won Emmys for their supporting performances in the series.²² But neither of these white actors was the primary focus of *Room 222*. As *The Complete Encyclopedia of Television Programs* indicates, the series was conceived as a "comedy-drama" presenting "life in an integrated urban high school as seen through the eyes of Pete Dixon, a black American history instructor, whose classes are held in Room 222."²³ This description is telling, for whereas its emphasis on the racially integrated character of the fictional Walt Whitman High School duly identifies *Room 222*'s widely noted thematic hook, its observation that series story lines unfold "through the eyes of Pete Dixon" suggests that, interracialist negotiations notwithstanding, black subjectivity in particular constitutes the program's analytical focus. Indeed, the show's abiding orientation along the perspectives of Pete (Lloyd Haynes) and his intermittent "love interest," black guidance counselor Liz McIntyre (Denise Nicholas), rather than authorizing an exploration of interracial relations, founded a persistent engagement with the problem of forging a specifically African American collectivity across potentially divisive intraracial differences. Moreover, Pete's and Liz's solid middle-class positioning allowed for such differences to be figured principally in terms of a social-class stratification that always implicitly informed the show's narrative developments.

In his criticism of the show that I cite above, John Killens implies that it does



The cast of *Room 222*. Clockwise from top left: Denise Nicholas, Karen Valentine, Lloyd Haynes, Michael Constantine. Photo courtesy of Photofest.

not satisfactorily present or otherwise address race-based dissension among the characters who populate the halls of Walt Whitman High. Although it is true that few of the story lines from *Room 222*'s five-year run treat race relations directly or explicitly,²⁴ the show was characterized from the beginning by drily oblique statements about racial politics, the ambiguity of which I think actually evidences the show's canny awareness of the impossibility of its otherwise speaking to the issue except through platitudes and well-meaning clichés. This ambiguity on racial issues became clear in the first episode, in which Karen Valentine's character, student teacher Alice Johnson, apologetically introduces herself to Pete Dixon, saying, "I know I have a lot of the middle-class hang-ups. I went to a segregated school." Pete replies evenly, "It's OK — so did I."²⁵ A similar exchange takes place in the episode on which I want to focus now.

First broadcast on November 2, 1973, during *Room 222*'s final season on the air, "Pete's Protegé" depicts the trials of another young, white student teacher, a man this time, whose eagerness to be friends with the students actually hinders his effectiveness as an instructor. The episode starts off with an exchange between student teacher Arthur Billings and Pete that once again manifests a refined ambiguity on issues of race relations. With the students already gathered for class at the beginning of the school day, Arthur is bustling about

the room distributing papers when Pete enters, conspicuously equipped with a very professional-looking briefcase. Arthur returns Pete's "Good morning" by eagerly announcing, "I already passed out the test papers so you wouldn't have to take up class time." Pete responds with characteristic cool irony—"Well, that's no way to get the students to love you"—which Arthur meets by ingenuously hoping out loud to "get along with all my classes the way I do with this one." Just then, the school bell rings, signaling the beginning of the class period, and Pete indicates to Arthur that they'd "better get started," adding drily, "I wouldn't want to waste that time you saved me." At this, Arthur good-naturedly moves to take his seat at the rear of the classroom, at the same time unself-consciously tossing off a lame witticism: "I'll go sit in the back of the bus." This near-throwaway line in an otherwise unremarkable scene immediately sets up a superficial dramatic tension as Arthur, turned just slightly away from Pete in preparation to leave the front of the room, suddenly realizes what he has said, his face registering this new awareness before the camera. Pete, standing over his desk just to Arthur's right, looks up from the paperwork he has been perusing and eyes the student teacher with mock wariness as Arthur turns to address him again: "Hey, uh . . . I didn't mean, uh. . . ." Then comes what, in the wry world of *Room 222*, constitutes an effective punch line—Pete's response, delivered in a tone of utter flatness: "Arthur, you've been student-teaching with me long enough to know better." Arthur, evidently uncertain about the meaning of this remark, ends the exchange by intoning hesitantly, "Thanks, Pete," and awkwardly ambles away from Pete's desk, as Pete looks on in smirking amusement.

Now, I have claimed that such scenes evidence the show's canniness about the dubious project of making definitive statements about racial politics on prime-time television. I can certainly see, however, that the noncommittal quips by Pete Dixon might be interpreted as ineffectual efforts to gloss over the profound difficulty of race relations—and, especially, of racial integration—during the contemporary era. Even if we read the statements in this way, however, we would have to recognize that such "glossing over" can really only constitute the show's repression of racial concerns into a sort of "political unconscious" that will necessarily inform the working through of the surface-level plot for any given episode. In other words, I am suggesting that the cool shrugging off of raciopolitical concerns that the show regularly enacts actually signals its profound engagement with racially inflected social difference at a subtextual level, but also that its containment of such concerns within con-

ceptual parameters subjectively constituted by Pete Dixon indicates that their import will become manifest specifically with respect to *intra-* rather than *interracial* considerations. Thus I propose that, contrary to what its superficial aspect might suggest, *Room 222* is not primarily about racial *integration* at all; rather, it always represents an allegorical narrative about social *differentiation* among black subjects, and, in particular, thematizes the articulation of different black subjects into various socioeconomic class positions.²⁶

Let me approach the matter from a different direction for a moment, to buttress my claim that *Room 222* is not first and foremost about integration. In doing this, it will be helpful to consider a bit of advance ad copy for another ABC series that premiered in the same season as *Room 222*. The premise of *The Brady Bunch* involved a man and a woman, each widowed and raising three children—he boys, she girls—who marry and thus consolidate their fragmented households into one big happy family, weekly overcoming the obstacles to that consolidation inherent in their children's gender difference. Thus, as the network put it in its preseason publicity campaign, *The Brady Bunch* dealt with "the most difficult integration of them all, that of the sexes."²⁷

If we conceive of integration in this unique way, identifying it as the consolidation—however difficult and problematic—of disparate elements into a single, undifferentiated social entity that on U.S. network television has always been represented as the nuclear family, then we must recognize *Room 222*'s singular disengagement from the networks' integrative mission. That singularity is emphasized if we refer to the programming schedules from the time of *Room 222*'s run, which evidence a contrast between its function and that of the other ABC shows receiving prime-time airplay. Throughout its broadcast history, *Room 222* was juxtaposed in ABC's schedule with programs that depicted variations on the consolidated nuclear family within a specifically domestic context. The show was always preceded in the schedule by one or a combination of the following programs: *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, with Bill Bixby; *Make Room for Granddaddy*, with Danny Thomas; *The Partridge Family*, with Shirley Jones, David Cassidy, and Susan Dey; *The Odd Couple*, with Tony Randall and Jack Klugman; and the aforementioned *Brady Bunch*, with Florence Henderson and Robert Reed. The classroom series was followed in the schedule, most notably, by *The Odd Couple* and *Adam's Rib*, an adaptation of the Hepburn and Tracy movie that again depicted the difficult reconciliation of the genders within the domestic context, with Ken Howard and Blythe Danner in the starring roles.²⁸

Unlike all of these shows, *Room 222* was emphatically not set in the context of the traditional nuclear family (indeed, to my knowledge, it never depicted a single functional nuclear family in all of its five-year run); nor did it set up relations among its characters that could be construed as metaphorically figuring familial ties. Thus, however harmoniously unified the Walt Whitman High School community might have appeared, *Room 222*'s disengagement from the familial vocabulary that is the predominant televisual mode for indicating stable social synthesis suggests that the latter was not its major concern. On the other hand, however, *Room 222*'s classroom setting offered an ideal configuration through which to enact a social *division* that always implicated black subjects specifically, due precisely to the show's focus on Pete Dixon rather than on the various white characters.

Although Pete, and Liz McIntyre, too, is a solidly middle-class professional figure, there is, as Cleveland Amory put it in an early review, a "menace in *Room 222*" as well: "Student Jason Allen (Heshimu) for example, could have stepped out of 'The Blackboard Jungle.'" ²⁹ Indeed, particularly in the early seasons, Jason presented a strong antidote to Pete's and Liz's upright middle-classness; a product of the Los Angeles slums, Jason was portrayed as an angry outsider, deeply suspicious and given to thievery. Over the years, his character mellowed quite a bit, but he still provided the perfect foil to Pete's professionalism by clearly representing socioeconomic disadvantage. The means of this representation was partially explained by John Wasserman, in his 1969 profile of Denise Nicholas entitled "The Girl in 'Room 222'": "Black people, like whites, have different vocabularies and speaking styles for different situations. There are accents, phrasing and sounds for one's peers and friends. There are other noises [*sic*] for outsiders. . . . It is a subtle point, and one which is generally ignored in integrated theater." ³⁰ Wasserman implicitly praises *Room 222* specifically for *not* ignoring this point, but he might have gone even further because, even *within* a given racial group there exist different modes of speech corresponding to, among other things, differences in socioeconomic class, and these, also, were represented in the series. Thus, even as Jason Allen became a respectable member of the Walt Whitman High School community, his dialectal speech (which, like that of the other students, was also marked by the youth slang of the period) set him apart from the professional class represented by Mr. Dixon and Miss McIntyre. In the episode I am considering here, this is evidenced in Jason's brief commentary (the dialectal cadences of which I can only imperfectly suggest in print) regarding the erection of a statue of Walt Whit-

man in front of the school: "Man, it must be a real groove to have you a statue put up in front of a big buildin'."

Thus, Jason implicitly represents one of the various social classes into which the black community can be differentiated, in contrast to that represented by the black faculty at the school. With the difference between professionals like Pete and less advantaged students like Jason always operative as a subtext to the main action of *Room 222*, the explicit differentiation of the black community into various subcategories can be played out as the division between teacher and student that is regularly the ostensible subject of series episodes. In "Pete's Protégé," Pete has to correct student teacher Arthur Billings's too-close bonding with his students, thus reinforcing the necessary division upon which the community is founded. Having had to take over Pete's class when Pete was out sick, Arthur found himself confronted by a roomful of unruly students whose respect he could not gain precisely because he had identified with them too closely as a "friend," rather than as an authority figure. In response, he has harshly criticized the work of a slow—and, notably, *white*—student whom Pete had been tutoring privately, undermining what little self-confidence the boy had begun to achieve. Upon learning of this development after returning to school, Pete angrily confronts Arthur with his error, exasperatedly insisting, "A teacher can make mistakes. He can have his good days and he can have his bad days. But the one thing that he's *got* to do is stimulate his students! The one thing he *cannot* do is discourage them." When Arthur responds with a dejected, "I know that," Pete demands, "Then why did you tell Leo what you did? Now he wants to quit his tutoring; he doesn't think it makes any difference anymore." After establishing that, although Leo's report is indeed of relatively poor quality, it nonetheless represents the best work that the boy has done, Pete offers an analysis of Arthur's action: "You know, I think that you took it out on him because of what the kids did to you, and you knew he would take it from you." In implicit defense of his reaction to the students' betrayal of him, Arthur protests, "I've been nothing but a friend to those kids, all of them—a real friend! I've played ball with them, I've eaten with them. . . ." Pete, now occupying the screen together with Arthur after having confronted him in a staccato shot–reverse shot series, offers a closing response that further solidifies the teachers' common status as distinct from that of the students, symbolically restoring order to the classroom venue: "That's fine! Don't stop doing that; but you're not a student anymore! . . . You can't be one of the class and in charge of it at the same time, it's too confusing."

Pete's invocation of "confusion" is apt, of course, but it serves just as well in relation to an undifferentiated black collectivity as it does with respect to an undisciplined high school classroom, suggesting the show's engagement in the process of distinguishing Pete's subject position from that of his black students, on more levels than one. As far as the show's critics are concerned, what is *most* confusing and ill defined is the show's exact stance on the politics of interracial relations. But that confusion, as I think I have begun to demonstrate, is evidence not necessarily of any fundamental weakness in the program itself, but rather of its problematic situation at the intersection of demands for televisual fidelity to a unitary "black experience" and the increasingly evident illusoriness of such a social phenomenon. To attempt to represent the latter in 1969 was to engage an extremely complex set of exigencies within African American cultural politics, hence the controversy caused by *Room 222* among many black critics. What that controversy most strongly suggests, however, is that the means of the show's engagement with those exigencies are prime objects for study and analysis—just as the mere fact of it is something to be remarked—amidst the difficult demands of the contemporary context, as what is too easily summed up as "the black experience" becomes increasingly conflicted and dis-integrated.

Notes

This essay originally appeared in Phillip Brian Harper's *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity*, and is reprinted here by permission of Oxford University Press.

- 1 This is not to say, of course, that a great deal of work has not already been done on televisual representations of African Americans, much of it focusing on specific individual programs. On *Amos 'n' Andy*, see Thomas Cripps, "Amos 'n' Andy and the Debate over American Racial Integration," *American History/American Television: Interpreting the Video Past*, ed. John E. O'Connor (New York: Ungar, 1983), 33–54. For an extended consideration of the show's broadcast history in both radio and television, see Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: Free Press, 1991).
- 2 Robert Lewis Shayon, "Living Color on Television," *Saturday Review*, 24 November 1962, 25.
- 3 Robert Lewis Shayon, "Living Color on Television—2," *Saturday Review*, 9 February 1963, 57.
- 4 Robert Lewis Shayon, "Can tv Overcome?" *Saturday Review*, 29 October 1966, 24.

- 5 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983).
- 6 Consider, for instance, the study on *The Cosby Show* of the 1980s and 1990s, which indicated that white viewers accustomed to the evident affluence of Bill Cosby's television family took it to suggest the decreasing necessity of further activism on behalf of African Americans' equitable social treatment. See Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).
- 7 "I Spy: Comedian Bill Cosby Is First Negro Co-star in tv Network Series," *Ebony*, September 1965, 66.
- 8 Stanley Karnow, "Bill Cosby: Variety Is the Life of Spies," *Saturday Evening Post*, 25 September 1965, 88.
- 9 Robert de Roos, "The Spy Who Came in for the Gold," *TV Guide*, 23 October 1965, 15.
- 10 On the contemporary controversies regarding *Julia*'s racial- and gender-political significances, see Aniko Bodroghkozy, "'Is This What You Mean by Color tv?': Race, Gender, and Contested Meanings in NBC's *Julia*," *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 143-167.
- 11 "Wonderful World of Color," *Time*, 13 December 1968, 70.
- 12 Robert Lewis Shayon, "Changes," *Saturday Review*, 18 April 1970, 46.
- 13 It may actually be through the theorization of televisual realism as simulacral that we can explain the failure (as putatively exemplified by *The Cosby Show*) of lived reality to approximate the social scenarios that popular series seem to envision. Following Michel Foucault by positing the simulacrum as that which suspends resemblance by "subvert[ing] the hierarchical relation of model to copy," Scott Durham reads Pierre Klossowski's *Diana at Her Bath* as a narrativization of the simulacrum that—because its temporality reveals the undoing of the narrative subject's self-resemblance—exposes its fundamentally utopian, and hence objectively unrealizable, character. See Durham, "From Magritte to Klossowski: The Simulacrum, between Painting and Narrative," *October* 64 (spring 1993): 17-33; 20 for the quoted passage. For Foucault's theorization of the simulacrum, see his *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. and ed. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
- 14 On television "relevancy," see Erik Barnouw's classic *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 430-440; and Jane Feuer, "MTM Enterprises: An Overview," in *MTM: "Quality Television"*, ed. Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi (London: British Film Institute, 1984), 1-31; especially 1-4.
- 15 On this black nationalist aesthetic, see my "Nationalism and Social Division in

- Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 2 (winter 1993): 234-255; reprinted in *Identities*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- 16 John Oliver Killens, "Our Struggle Is Not to Be White Men in Black Skin," *TV Guide*, 25 July 1970, 6.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 8.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, 7, 8.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 8.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, 9.
 - 21 John Garabedian, "Unseasonable," *Newsweek*, 6 October 1969, 113-114.
 - 22 Craig T. Norback, Peter G. Norback, and the Editors of *TV Guide* magazine, *TV Guide Almanac* (New York: Ballantine, 1980), 303-304.
 - 23 Vincent Terrace, *The Complete Encyclopedia of Television Programs 1947-1979*, 2d ed., rev., vol. 2 (South Brunswick: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1979), 847.
 - 24 These story lines are summarized in Joel Eisner and David Krinsky, *Television Comedy Series: An Episode Guide to 153 TV Sitcoms in Syndication* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1984), 711-719.
 - 25 Quoted in Cleveland Amory, Review of *Room 222*, *TV Guide*, 25 October 1969, 52.
 - 26 Indeed, it is all the more possible to conceive racial-group politics in *Room 222* as undergoing a type of *repression* when we consider that jokes—such as those Pete Dixon makes in response to racially charged situations—constitute a primary affective indicator of the repressive process in Freud's foundational theorization of it. See Sigmund Freud, "Repression" (1915), in *General Psychological Theory*, ed. and introduced by Philip Rieff (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1963), 104-115; especially 108 and 110-111.

Further, it is the repression enacted in *Room 222* that actually founds its allegorical character—its status as a text through which another, more or less related one, may be discerned and read, according to the preliminary formulation offered by Craig Owens (see "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," parts 1 and 2 [1980], *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992], 52-69 and 70-87; 54 for the current citation). As Owens indicates, the very logic of psychoanalysis, which presupposes that the significance of past (and characteristically repressed) occurrences can be identified through the interpretation of a subject's present symptoms, renders allegory crucial to its project (53).

In Owens's extensive theorization of its function in the postmodern context, allegory is presented as a fundamentally deconstructive (and *self*-deconstructive) phenomenon that, in Paul de Man's formulation, "persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do" (cited in Owens, 79). For instance, Owens suggests that, to function as a critique of the museum site as "dumping ground," as

Owens claims they do, the "combine paintings" of Robert Rauschenberg "must also declare themselves to be part of the dumping ground they describe. They thus relapse into the 'error' they denounce, and this is what allows us to identify them as allegorical" (78). Regarding *Room 222*, we might identify as the pertinent "error" the insistent racio-political commentary that constitutes the show's discernible burden while at the same time serving as the object of its critique. Notably, it is precisely in such a (self-)deconstructive moment that *Room 222*'s allegorical character merges with its potential simulacral function because, as Scott Durham indicates, the simulacrum enacts a similar self-subversion, constituting as it does "a figure that suspends and reverses the authority that calls it into being" (21).

Such self-deconstruction as apparently operates in *Room 222* does not, it must be emphasized, *negate* the racio-political commentary manifested therein; it is precisely that commentary that I propose we take seriously and that, after all, constitutes a primary object of my analysis here. Rather, the contradictions that characterize the program are intrinsic to the cultural text *per se* and, in this case, do no more than indicate the as yet underappreciated complexity of representational processes in relation to racial-identity politics.

- 27 "Premières: Old Wrinkles," *Time*, 3 October 1969, 84.
- 28 Larry James Gianakos, *Television Drama Series Programming: A Comprehensive Chronicle, 1959-1975* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978).
- 29 Amory, 52.
- 30 John L. Wasserman, "The Girl in 'Room 222,'" *TV Guide*, 20 September 1969, 26.