The hidden truths in black sitcoms

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Abstract

George Bernard Shaw once said, "when a thing is funny, search it for a hidden truth." Such counsel becomes foreboding as we consider the "hidden truths," or messages, embedded in Black situation comedies. Shaw's charge, applied to the Black situation comedy as a form of cultural expression, leads us to consider the truths about Blackness that these programs offer, and the possible truths revealed about those who promote Black situation comedy programming. Here, Black situation comedy describes programming that employs a core cast of African American characters and focuses on those characters' sociocultural, political, and economic experiences (e.g., Amos 'n' Andy, Good Times, and The Fresh Prince of Bel Air). Black sitcoms are often cited for their additional and frequent reliance on negative, stereotypical characterizations of Blackness to promote humor (Gray; Hough; Means Coleman; Nelson). In this chapter, we discuss how the comedic mediation of Black identity impacts and informs African Americans' lives. We are concerned with the manner in which Blackness is defined within the symbolic, as well as how media as an industry and institution is guided by American society's own social, political, and ideological legacies. Toward these ends, we summarize the fifty-year history of the Black sitcom on network television, uncovering the purported "hidden truths" about Blackness these comedies propagate. To wrap up, we will consider the potential for those who consume media and care about its content to become agents of change through group activism and individual human agency.
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