

PALACKÝ UNIVERSITY OLOMOUC

FACULTY OF ARTS

Department of English and American Studies

Štěpán Svoboda

Moving On Up: Representation of African Americans in  
Situational Comedies

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Mgr. David Livingstone, Ph.D.

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently and that I have listed all primary and secondary sources.

In Olomouc .....

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Štěpán Svoboda

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## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	5
2. Situational Comedy.....	6
2.1 Origin of the Genre .....	6
2.2 Defining the Genre .....	7
2.3 Subtypes of Sitcoms .....	11
3. Stereotypes and Representation of African Americans .....	13
3.1 Stereotypes in History .....	13
3.2 African American Representation in Early Films and Television .....	17
4. Analysis of Specific Sitcoms .....	21
4.1 <i>The Jeffersons</i> - 1970s.....	21
4.1.1 Analysis of Characters .....	22
4.1.2 Discussed Topics and their Impact on Society .....	26
4.2 <i>The Cosby Show</i> - 1980s .....	28
4.2.1 Analysis of Characters .....	29
4.2.2 Discussed Topics and their Impact on Society .....	33
4.3 <i>Atlanta</i> - 2010s .....	35
4.3.1 Analysis of Characters .....	36
4.3.2 Discussed Topics and the Reflection of Society.....	38
5. Conclusion .....	40
Resumé.....	43
References.....	46
Annotation .....	50
Anotace .....	51

## 1. Introduction

Visual media has become a significant part of our culture's everyday life. The last decades were noticeably influenced by the rise of the television platform which offered a great variety of programmes for people to watch. One of these programmes was the situational comedy (sitcom for short). Before it appeared on television, the concept of situational comedies was already introduced to viewers on radio stations. However, the visuals closely associated with these comedies brought new techniques to this genre and changed it forever.

After television was marketed for the consumers, it approached a large number of costumers. This number expanded by each decade. Television has proven to be reasonably influential by the time most of the American household owned a television. Therefore, the programmes displayed grew to have an immense impact on the viewers and their opinions. However, the opinions presented in the programmes mostly reflected the ideas of the majority to not stir any controversy and keep their viewership. This was a reason for a complete omission of minorities or their stereotypical depiction to downgrade and ridicule their position in society.

In the first section of this thesis, the situational comedy will be defined, including its sub-categorisations. The genre's origin and its development throughout time will be mentioned.

Furthermore, the thesis will mention general information about African American representation in comedy with the focus on stereotypical depictions presented in the 19th century. In the next section, the focus will be cast on African Americans and their portrayal in sitcoms after the rise of the movie industry and television in the United States. The main goal of this thesis will be to analyse characters and topics discussed in situational comedies after the civil rights movement. This analysis will be centred around three situational comedies from different decades with a predominantly African American cast. The first analysed sitcom, *The Jeffersons*, will represent the 1970s. The 1980s will be characterised by *The Cosby Show* and finally, the show which will represent the current times will be *Atlanta*.

The goal of the thesis will be to provide a comparison of the characters depicted in different decades and to inform how the stereotypes set in the 19th century influenced personalities of the characters or whether these traits evolved over time. Additionally, several themes which were presented in the shows will be analysed, and the possible

impact of these topics will be discussed. The conclusion will be to contrast these results and to state how African Americans are represented in comedy and whether the topics discussed in the shows were impactful on American society.

## 2. Situational Comedy

### 2.1 Origin of the Genre

The genre is said to have originated on radio stations, where it found its popularity. Laura LaPlaca in *Radio Sitcoms: History and Preservation* suggests that there is a widespread tendency to place the history of situational comedies on par with the invention of television. However, radio sitcoms are seen by most academics as a “quiet prelude”<sup>1</sup> to the television sitcoms. It took decades of experimenting with the genre to finally present its form in the television medium. There is also other evidence which suggests that sitcoms are closely linked with the invention of television. According to David Marc, in *Origins of the Genre*, the name ‘situation comedy’ was not widely used before the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> This means that the genre gained its final name after it had been transferred from American radios. Afterwards, the name sitcom was coined to make the name simple and suitable for promotional purposes.

With the rise of television, the newly founded American broadcasting networks tried to implement this popular radio comedy genre into their viewing schedule. This, of course, led to many attempts to adapt the already existing radio sitcoms into a television format. Joanne Morreale claims that the first radio comedy programme implemented onto television and the first American sitcom was *Mary Kay and Johnny* (1947-1950).<sup>3</sup> Another example of an adaptation is *Amos 'n' Andy Show*. This American sitcom tells a story about two African Americans living in Harlem, which is the cultural centre of African Americans in New York City. During the time of radio sitcoms, this show was performed by two white men pretending to be black. After the programme received its television adaptation, the two main characters were played by African Americans. However, the show often showed stereotypical depictions of this minority and even used ‘blackface,’ a term that will be discussed in the following chapters. Because of this

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<sup>1</sup> Laura LaPlaca, “Radio Sitcoms: History and Preservation,” *A Companion to the History of American Broadcasting* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018) 281.

<sup>2</sup> David Marc, “Origins of the Genre,” *The Sitcom Reader: America Re-Viewed, Still Skewed* (State University of New York Press, 2016) 1.

<sup>3</sup> Joanne Morreale, *Critiquing the Sitcom: a Reader* (Syracuse Univ. Press, 2004) 1.

visual depiction of blackface, which was of course not visible on radios, the TV adaptation received a negative reaction from the NAACP. This negative reaction was one of the reasons the show was cancelled a few years later in 1955 while its original radio version remained on air until 1960.

Although sitcoms were not listed at the top of the popular programmes in the early stages of television, from 1951, they became more prominent. The reason for this might have been that creators had found the right way of sitcoms being implemented. *I Love Lucy* has become the highest-rated TV programme in the United States. This accomplishment, according to Morreale, influenced other creators and brought “an onslaught of new sitcoms.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, another genre that was similarly transferred from radios, variety shows, were popular in the early stages of television but lacked any kind of innovation. Therefore, the genre became less popular and lost its place in the primetime hours. In the following sub-section, the thesis will examine the possible ways the genre attained its place and how it differs from other television genres.

## 2.2 Defining the Genre

If we are meant to analyse a situational comedy and the representation of its characters’ personalities, we need to understand the main principles and the purpose of this genre. Every genre is affected by the process of evolution, usually by discovering what captures the attention of the general public. Therefore each genre is flexible, and it is often problematic to assign programmes with a specific genre since the characteristics of genres are never stable. The main problem usually arises when creators try to modify or completely abandon certain elements that are seen as prototypical for a genre. However, according to several scholars, there is something quite special about traditional sitcoms. Jane Feuer in *Genre Study and Television* states that once a person has seen at least one episode of a sitcom, then the viewer is already familiarized with the concept and the main principle of the genre: “if you have seen one sitcom, you have seen them all.”<sup>5</sup> This statement by no means degrades the genre. Nonetheless, it emphasizes that the formula is simple, and even after decades of existence, it still finds its viewers without being altered. On the other hand, some scholars express that there is

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<sup>4</sup> Morreale 4.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Feuer, “Genre Study and Television,” *Channels of Discourse Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (1992) 113.

a lack of artistry when it comes to television comedy. Michael V. Tueth in *Breaking and Entering Transgressive Comedy on Television* claims that over the years of television there were only a few programmes that tried to break the rules from the standard and repetitive elements.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, according to Brett Mills in *The Sitcom*, some scholars claim that situational comedies are less innovative and are mostly seen as a form of “escapism after a hard day at work.”<sup>7</sup>

The main goal of situational comedies is to be comically entertaining. Mills uses the term ‘comic impetus’ which, according to him, is essential for every sitcom. He defines it as “a force which drives sitcom.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is explained that this does not necessarily mean that sitcoms are only driven by humour. There can be segments that are emotionally moving. However, these segments should never lose their way from the main ‘comic impetus’ for too long. As a result, the programme would lose its characteristic of a traditional sitcom, and it would become more of a drama rather than comedy. In regards to the comedic aspect, David Pierson in *American Situation Comedies and the Modern Comedy of Manners* suggests that sitcoms have become “a worthy descendant and a modern variation of the theatrical comedy of manners genre.”<sup>9</sup> He associates the comedy of manners with sitcoms because of the similar satirical depiction of contemporary society. Furthermore, Pierson claims that sitcoms can be seen as a “historical and cultural document”<sup>10</sup> which indicates social behaviour among members of the same or different race, social classes, genders or relationships.

It is also essential to mention that the story of the situational comedies is usually associated with a close group of people, most of which meet on a daily basis. The characters usually tend to be members of a family, close friends or co-workers, basically people within a close social circle. These main characters need to be likeable and memorable. They should not be repulsive to the viewers. If supporting characters appear, they are usually introduced to cause a conflict with the main characters. However, recurring characters do not have to appear at all. In each episode, the main

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<sup>6</sup> Michael V. Tueth, “Breaking and Entering Transgressive Comedy on Television,” *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* (State University of New York Press, 2005) 25.

<sup>7</sup> Brett Mills, *The Sitcom* (Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2013) 2.

<sup>8</sup> Mills 6.

<sup>9</sup> David Pierson, “American Situation Comedies and the Modern Comedy of Manners,” *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* (State University of New York Press, 2005) 45.

<sup>10</sup> Pierson 45.

characters are set upon a comic occasion that feels domestic or trivial. In general, the situation typically revolves around a simple problem that might happen to anyone in real life - which led to the naming of the genre 'situational'. Situations of a grander scale are usually ignored and are not associated with sitcoms. This may be one of the reasons for the popularity of the genre - people can relate their lives to the simple comic events occurring in the lives of characters that appear on their television screens. However, Mills argues that sitcoms are certainly "not simple, and require an understanding of complex social conventions and generic rules for them to be enjoyed."<sup>11</sup>

Another essential aspect of sitcoms is that the situations or events are only momentary and mostly do not intervene with the following episodes. Once an episode ends, the situation or the problem is resolved, and things go back to where they had been. Due to this, the viewers can miss out on a few episodes, and they can still understand the situations. Typically if a viewer knows characters of a specific sitcom, these characters are likely to act the same way in every episode with minimal character development.

Because sitcoms usually display a set of characters from different social backgrounds, many scholars and academics tend to analyze this genre, trying to figure out how different social classes, races, sexual minorities are represented in them. Because some of the programmes tend to be viewed by millions of viewers, these shows have the power to influence the opinions of viewers on depicted minorities. This may lead to some negative consequences in society, although it is typical for sitcoms to represent characters with exaggeration of their traits. As a result, sitcoms are sometimes criticised for stereotypical depictions of characters which might result in further ridiculing these groups of people in real life. For this particular reason, sitcoms have become the object of examination of social issues. Which also reflects the objective of this thesis - to analyse the representation of African Americans.

An important point that requires mentioning is that situational comedies are made for television which is mostly a domestic medium. The creators are aware that these programmes will be seen by a group of people in their homes. For some people, sitcoms might resemble similarities with theatre plays. This similarity is further emphasised by the inclusion of a laugh track which is a typical feature for traditional

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<sup>11</sup> Mills 5.

sitcoms. In theatre, people get to witness a reaction from other viewers which might influence their reaction to different moments the viewers observe. The laugh track does not only include expressions of amusement. It often incorporates a demonstration of surprise or shock. These expressions reflect similar responses that people observing theatre plays might have. Therefore the creators of sitcoms try to replicate these reactions and apply them during comic or emotional moments in the show. It may seem surprising, however, most traditional sitcoms were shot in front of a studio audience. On account of this live audience, the creators were able to observe the reception of the jokes they had presented even before the actual airing of the programme on TV. The laugh track was therefore used to enhance and boost the authentic reaction of the public. The invention of the laugh track is credited to Charles Douglass who invented it in 1953. Douglas made a portable 'Laff Box' that included a variety of recorded public reactions. Therefore, creators could get a full audience reaction just by a simple press of a button. Although the invention has proven to be reasonably useful to many comedy creators, it has also found its criticism not only among reviewers but actors as well. According to Jennifer Keishin Armstrong, a BBC journalist, British actor David Niven in an interview in 1955 said that "The laugh track is the single greatest affront to public intelligence I know of."<sup>12</sup> Even after decades of its existence, viewers are still able to hear the laugh track in situational comedies which value the traditional format. However, some sitcoms set up a new layout and found a way to present their programme without it. Due to this, there might be a problem with categorising these innovative types of programmes, because they have lost an essential part that is associated with sitcoms. The difficulty arises because once the laugh track disappears, there is only a minimal difference between sitcom and comedy-drama.

As Mills points out, to distinguish programmes from being sitcoms or comedy-dramas some network companies or broadcasting regulators, such as Ofcom, define genres based on the length of an episode.<sup>13</sup> American sitcoms tend to last around 15 or 30 minutes whereas the comedy-dramas are usually more lengthy and typically require a greater number of sets for filming.

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<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Keishin Armstrong, "Culture - Where Does Canned Laughter Come from – and Where Did It Go?" (BBC, 26 Sept. 2016) [www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160926-where-does-canned-laughter-come-from-and-where-did-it-go](http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160926-where-does-canned-laughter-come-from-and-where-did-it-go).

<sup>13</sup> Mills 33.

### 2.3 Subtypes of Sitcoms

Based on different aspect like the complexity of characters, settings or topics discussed, we can categorise sitcoms into different subtypes. Of course, many reviewers, critics or academics have different guidelines which they create to characterise these sitcoms. Some professionals distinguish mainly based on where the story takes place - domestic, workplace sitcoms. Another possible division may be a traditional and a modern format. These two are differentiated by whether the sitcoms use traditional shooting techniques and are filmed in studios. If they are modern, they are using elements that are usually not associated with the original formula of sitcoms. Other specialists define the subgenres in more detail, considering more aspects at the same time. For instance, Richard F. Taflinger distinguishes between actcoms (action-based sitcoms), domcoms (domestic comedy) and dramedies (dramatic comedy).<sup>14</sup> With this division, Taflinger considered many different aspects, including the complexity of characters' personalities, the importance of the setting or the significance of situations.

Actcoms, are the most common forms of sitcoms. These types of sitcoms regularly use a problem, where all the actions or events tend to be very simple and do not display profound emotional incidents, but rather physical. This problem leads to a complication that is relatively straightforward and results in a character's reaction to solve it. Characters can be often seen with exaggerated feelings, and their goals are predictable. The setting is not essential, it only functions as a background for the situation and has no particular connection to the problem. Therefore, settings are minimalistic and usually include the family house or the workplace of characters. Also, they remain unchanged throughout the series.

Domestic comedies, domcoms for short, try to produce close relationships among characters. On account of this, the characters are more likeable and believable. Characters are the main focus and even supporting roles are often vital to the plot. If we consider the situations, they are less concerned about random arguments but are more focused on authentic personal problems that even a viewer might recognise. The problem is associated with an emotional dilemma that needs to be solved. Settings are selected more carefully than in actcoms and are not only the background, but it has its function in the plot.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard F. Taflinger, *Sitcom: What It Is, How It Works* (28 May 1996) [public.wsu.edu/~taflinge/sitcom.html](http://public.wsu.edu/~taflinge/sitcom.html).

If we consider the number of sitcoms being created, dramedies are the least frequent. Taflinger calls them thought-based, and according to him, they are the most popular sub-genre of sitcoms.<sup>15</sup> Although they are popular among viewers, they are complex and therefore problematic to make. The plot is associated with complicated social situations, and it puts the main characters' history and emotions in the spotlight. The main characters have their opinions on different social topics which sometimes leads to a clash of beliefs.

Race of the main protagonists is another aspect that unquestionably categorises sitcoms. Segregation in sitcoms, and many other forms of entertainment, is to an extent still present to this day. Sitcoms with predominantly white characters tend to be the most frequent type since they present the majority of American society. Therefore they attract a higher number of viewers. If we take into account minorities, black sitcoms are the most common. Other subtypes including Asian sitcoms or Hispanic sitcoms are not as wide-spread in American television. These sitcoms not only differ in races of the majority of the cast, but they also differentiate themselves in their topics, problems and the plot. For instance, black sitcoms sometimes engage in matters that concern racial problems in society. African American characters are often described in particularly stereotypical ways which will be explored in the following chapter.

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<sup>15</sup> Taflinger, *Sitcom: What It Is, How It Works*.

### **3. Stereotypes and Representation of African Americans**

Long before the rise of the sitcom on television screens, stereotypes of African American people have been already in existence. Stereotypes are sets of characteristics that people create after an encounter with other individuals that are part of a different social group. These characteristics are usually simplified, and their purpose is to create a racial distance from the rest of the general community. The traits are usually concerned with purely negative observations and are used to differentiate and ridicule people from the majority. Although these characteristics might not be accurate for every single individual, the stereotypes are associated with the whole social group. Historically, because of these characteristics, the majority demonstrated their superiority over minorities. Stereotypes can have an immense negative impact on people's opinions since some people might not get into personal contact with the stereotyped individuals and therefore the stereotypical depiction is the only thing they rely on while judging the group. This section will deal with examining the stereotypes associated with African Americans, studying its origin in the 19th century. Additionally, the way how these traits were transferred onto the first decades of television medium will be mentioned.

#### **3.1 Stereotypes in History**

One of the first stereotypical representations of African Americans in comedy was a fictional character created specifically for minstrel shows and theatres in the 19th century. His name was Jim Crow, whose name was later taken to be associated with Southern segregation laws called Jim Crow laws. The name itself was created by Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who according to Hip Hughes created the name from 'jimmy' which used to mean crowbar and a slang word 'crow' that was used since 18th century which denoted black people.<sup>16</sup> Rice was a white actor who created this persona to perform a song called 'Jump Jim Crow' while having his face blackened. Usually, the face was blackened in a way that the performers kept the areas around their mouth and eyes unmarked to highlight wide lips or huge eyes, or the mouth was additionally painted with red colour to resemble features of black people. The face blackening was used by non-black performers to make themselves look like African Americans. Their performance led to a presentation filled with stereotypical behaviours that reflected white people's perception of how black people acted. Because African Americans were

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<sup>16</sup> Hip Hughes, "Jim Crow and America's Racism Explained" (*Youtube*, 16 January 2016) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\\_gOtZ--4WE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_gOtZ--4WE).

an underprivileged group, especially in the Southern states, there was a low amount of African American actors. Therefore non-black people performing in blackface became a norm in American society in the 19th century. Just like most of the black population at the time of the act's creation, Jim Crow was a slave and was usually depicted as a farmer. He used to be performed while wearing only rags or torn clothes with shoes that had holes in them. In certain covers or pictures, Jim Crow is depicted in a specific pose resembling dancing. Angela M. Nelson in *African American Stereotypes in Prime-Time Television* states that Jim Crow shared the same characteristic features with a racial term 'Sambo.' Additionally, other stereotypical characters like Zip Coon, Uncle Remus and Uncle Tom are all connected and are possibly his alter egos.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes Sambo characters are only associated with black children, which possibly links to Scottish children's book *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899). However, the characteristics are identical to adult individuals as well. Therefore, Sambo characters are portrayed with positive and even childish behaviours. This behaviour was possibly linked to a stereotype of black people and their love of dancing and singing while working on plantations. Among other, more negative features, unintelligence, laziness and sometimes lying or even stealing tendencies were associated with these characters.<sup>18</sup>

Another male stereotype that was primarily used to promote slaves to auctioneers were Mandingoes. These characters were thought to be complete opposites of Samboes. They were young, athletic men who were also the perfect example of ideal slaves. On the other hand, they were usually despised by white men, since they felt threatened and afraid that Mandingoes would attract their wives because of their muscular physique. In the mid-1800s, "when the fear of emancipation reached panic proportions"<sup>19</sup> these characters started to be shown by writers as aggressive, angry and rebellious people to demonstrate what might happen if slavery were to be abolished. Because of this, they began to be called Brutes, Bucks or Nats. They were considered to be savages often described by animalistic features. Also, they were believed to take revenge for the way they had been mistreated by their slavers. White Southerners were

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<sup>17</sup> Angela M. Nelson, "African American Stereotypes in Prime-Time Television: An Overview," *African Americans and Popular Culture* (Praeger Publishers, 2008) 187.

<sup>18</sup> Nelson 187.

<sup>19</sup> Nelson 187.

afraid of Brutes because of their supposed sexual desire for white women. For that reason, white men felt threatened that Brutes may rape their wives or daughters.

Another stereotypical character, this time associated with females, was Mammy. Mammy characters were portrayed as vigorous women, who were servants in white families, usually in the South. For the same reasons as Samboes, Mammies were also performed while wearing blackface in minstrel shows. Because they were assumed to be working as cooks and caretakers of white families, the images of mammies were also used as adverts for many household items. They were mostly depicted wearing bandannas on their heads, and their clothes were typical dresses for maids. Similarly to Sambo tropes, David Pilgrim states that Mammies were caricatures that were “contented, even happy, as slaves.”<sup>20</sup> This was, of course, used to justify the position of African Americans. Although they were slaves, they were happy to serve and therefore there was no reason to feel sympathy for them. As for other characteristics, they were considered to be protective of their white family, serving as a mother figure for the children. Because of this, they were admired. Sometimes, Mammies were seen as very dominant women who were the head of the family. They were not afraid to speak their mind in contrast with their husbands, who were usually shy. Considering more negative stereotypes, they were portrayed as older, asexual or unattractive women. Donald Bogle in *Primetime Blues* explains this desexualised portrayal by describing Mammies as “an ideal mother surrogate”<sup>21</sup> which did not attract other men of the family. Most of the time, Mammies forgot their black origin. According to Melissa V. Harris-Perry, they “were not protector(s) or defender(s) of black children or communities”<sup>22</sup> and all their care and attention went to white families. An Additional subtype of Mammies were Sapphires. These caricatures were sassier, back-talking and impolite towards their husbands, children and even their masters.

Jezebel is another archetype of African American women in the 19th century, this time with more negative traits. In comparison with Mammies, Jezebels were complete opposites. Jezebels were portrayed as more attractive. They were also thought

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<sup>20</sup> David Pilgrim, “The Mammy Caricature” *The Mammy Caricature - Anti-Black Imagery - Jim Crow Museum* (Ferris State University, 2012) [www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies](http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies).

<sup>21</sup> Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) 24.

<sup>22</sup> Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (Yale University Press, 2014) 72.

to be sexually promiscuous. For this reason, Jezebels were often depicted as sexual objects. According to Maythee Rojas, this idea originated from the first European colonists in Africa, where the proof of women's promiscuity and immorality was their lack of clothing.<sup>23</sup> Jezebels were used as an image of black women that justified assaulting and raping them.

Another character that usually appeared in literary works rather than minstrel shows was Tragic Mulatto. The term was first used in short stories by American author Lydia Maria Child. First of all, interracial relationships were considered to be unacceptable in the 19th century, which is when the archetype was created. The characteristics of this archetype were not specific to a particular gender. However, it was more popular among female characters - Tragic Mulatta.<sup>24</sup> These characters are not purely of African American heritage, but rather of mixed race as the word mulatto suggests - one white parent and one black parent. Characters that were described as tragic mulattos were often misunderstood by society. Therefore, they were used by authors to make a compelling character with an internal struggle. Since mulattos were of mixed race, the characters themselves thought they were partially white and therefore liberated from being slaves. However, they were considered to be too black for white communities and on the other hand, too white for black communities. Therefore they were deemed to be outcasts by both groups of people, which resulted in depression and despair. David Pilgrim suggests that there was no escape from their difficult lives, and because they lived in a society that was strict on social hierarchy, they sometimes "found peace only in death."<sup>25</sup>

All of the archetypes mentioned above were specified into a single character that carried a name. The following stereotype does not have a character that would represent it. The stereotype focuses on watermelons and their consumption by black people. This trait started to appear during slavery. Then it became a symbol which represented their freedom. At first, the stereotype began to emerge when slaves took breaks after working on plantations. While taking this break, they were seen sitting and eating watermelons. They appeared to be happy, and thus, the stereotype came into existence. The main

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<sup>23</sup> Maythee Rojas, *Women of Color and Feminism* (Seal, 2009) 54.

<sup>24</sup> Nelson 189.

<sup>25</sup> David Pilgrim, "The Tragic Mulatto Myth," *The Tragic Mulatto Myth - Anti-Black Imagery - Jim Crow Museum* (Ferris State University, 2012) [www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mulatto/](http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/mulatto/).

point of the stereotype was that black people were simple-minded since just a watermelon makes them exceptionally happy. Again, this was meant to justify the position of black people as slaves. The image of black people eating watermelons began to be visualised in many adverts. Additionally, after Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans started to sell watermelons as they received the rights to do so. Which resulted in the negative connotation of white Southerners connected to watermelons.

Another example that is also related to food is the fried chicken stereotype. Similarly to watermelons, chicken meat was easily accessible for black people before and after The Civil War. The fried chicken was even shown being eaten by actors wearing blackface during minstrel shows. Because of this image and also the link with slavery, the fried chicken stereotype is considered racist even today.

### **3.2 African American Representation in Early Films and Television**

Even after Emancipation Proclamation and before television was invented, African Americans were usually not represented in films by themselves. Just like in minstrel shows, they were performed by white people wearing blackface. At the very beginning of film and television medium, they frequently assumed the same stereotypes from the previous century mentioned above. Eventually, blackface began to be seen as an offensive, racist approach of the past and slowly began to disappear. Once Hollywood started to cast black actors into their films, they still assumed the roles of maids, butlers or servants. Although black people usually played in supporting roles with minimal screen time, they brought a breath of fresh air with them and portrayed their roles with grace. For instance, Hattie McDaniel who played a typical Mammy character in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) won the Academy Award for her acting in supporting role and was the first African American winner of an Oscar.

Eventually, television sets were becoming more widespread in the early 1950s, which lead to an increase of possible viewers. According to Victoria E. Johnson, in *Racism and Television*, in 1948 only 1 per cent of American public owned television sets, this number increased to 50 per cent in 1953 and eventually by the early 1960s almost 90 per cent of American households owned a television.<sup>26</sup> Because people could

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<sup>26</sup> Victoria E. Johnson, "Racism and Television," *African Americans and Popular Culture* (Praeger Publishers, 2008) 169.

watch programmes from their homes, television was perceived to be more honest and intimate compared to watching films in cinemas. In addition, people were about to see news being broadcast alongside visuals. Therefore viewers' perceptions from this medium might have had a different impact which could have changed their opinions on social topics.

Primetime entertainment from the 1950s to the 1960s was dominated with programmes including sitcoms and dramas. With one of the first sitcoms on television *Amos 'n' Andy Show (1951)* and their use of blackface, it received negative reactions from NAACP. Because of this reaction from an organisation that defends the rights of African Americans, the creators of the show acknowledged their mistake and tried to find African Americans to play their parts. However, after this incident, the majority of subsequent shows portrayed only characters that were white, and non-whites were seen rarely. As if the representation of black people was a problem for which they would be criticised. One other possible reasons for this lack of representation might have also been policies imposed in the 1950s. They were imposed by some broadcasting networks that requested creators to include black Americans and to offer them roles not stereotypical for their race. Aniko Bodroghkozy in *Television and the Civil Rights Era* states that this policy was pursued by NBC-TV whose leaders wanted to dispose of any kind of offensive material regarding racist material, including blackface.<sup>27</sup>

Even television news broadcasts were of great importance for the rights of African Americans. Thanks to the television, their struggles became visible for all Americans across the country. Especially during the civil rights movement, television networks provided a great number of televised moments which showed the problem of segregation and racial inequality. This movement achieved its “most significant television moment”<sup>28</sup> when all three main TV stations aired Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech ‘I have a dream.’ The struggles of African Americans for their equality and freedom was heard and seen from all over the world. Furthermore, its visual presentation left a mark for people to see. After this pressure from the media, an Act was passed in 1964 ending segregation of African Americans, and other discriminatory issues were also prohibited - including Jim Crow Laws in the Southern states.

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<sup>27</sup> Aniko Bodroghkozy, “Television and the Civil Rights Era,” *African Americans and Popular Culture* (Praeger Publishers, 2008) 143.

<sup>28</sup> Bodroghkozy, “Television and the Civil Rights Era” 147.

Shortly after the civil rights movement in the late 1960s, black characters on television were becoming more visible and were not as stereotypical as earlier in the century. Also, black characters were starting to be seen in different jobs other than being servants. One important role in a comedy-drama *I Spy (1965-1968)* which showed African American without stereotypes was Bill Cosby's portrayal of a secret agent Alexander Scott. Cosby formed a lead duo with Robert Culp. This duo showed the American audience that cooperation between two races is possible. One of the first sitcoms that showed an African American in the leading role without stereotypical features was *Julia (1968-1971)*. Julia, played by Diahann Carroll, is was nurse who became a widow after her husband died in Vietnam. She became a single mother and therefore started to take care of her son Corey. The show was aired on NBC, which had policies to object to any stereotypical depictions of minorities. However, the show has sparked some controversies. In *Critiquing the Sitcom*, Bodroghkozy states that some viewers have pointed out that the black characters were shown without any flaws.<sup>29</sup> While on the other hand, the character's white neighbours were considered to be unintelligent and sloppy. Because of this, some of the viewers saw a form of "reverse discrimination."<sup>30</sup> Additionally, both Alexander and Julia were considered to be a mix of black and white characters. Which was possibly used to integrate black people into shows and therefore be considered acceptable to the white audience. This is the reason why the shows received polarised receptions among both communities.

At the start of the following decade, the 1970s, a series which provided a different representation of characters was introduced. This was a sitcom *Good Times (1974-1979)* developed by Norman Lear for CBS. In contrast to the series mentioned before, *Good times* tried to show a side of the real African American life. The CBS sitcom approached its characters in a more realistic manner. The story of *Good Times* revolves around an African American family, living in Chicago in poor conditions. One of the main characters, James Evans Sr, played by John Amos, is the head of the family who is working in various menial jobs, often having more jobs at the same time. Therefore, the episodes provide insight into the lives of impoverished African Americans and their struggle to overcome it. Although the characters are living in an

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<sup>29</sup> Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Race, Gender and Contested Meanings," *Critiquing the Sitcom: a Reader* (Syracuse Univ. Press, 2004) 139.

<sup>30</sup> Bodroghkozy, "Race, Gender and Contested Meanings" 139.

unpleasant environment and often deal with difficult situations, these characters still function successfully and can rely on each other. However, the relationships between the cast and the producers were not as perfect as with their portrayed counterparts. Jimmie Walker, who played James ‘J.J.’ Evans Jr, recalled in an interview that the relationships between the main cast were just professional since they did not interact with each other except for acting in the studio.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, John Amos, stated that he did not agree with the direction the show was going and “too much emphasis was being put on ‘J.J.’, his chicken head and saying ‘dy-no-mite’ every third page.”<sup>32</sup> Amos did not like the focus on the stereotyped comic aspect of his character’s son. However, he wanted the producers to centre on his character’s other children who had aspired to become a Supreme Court justice and a surgeon. After the disagreements, John Amos was fired, and his character was killed in a car accident in the fourth season. Although there were difficulties in the production of the show, it was still successful among its viewers. Miriam Miranda Chitiga, who collected responses of African Americans on the popularities of black sitcoms for her study *Black Sitcoms: A Black Perspective*, discovered that the viewers from South Carolina ranked *Good Times* among the three best black sitcoms of all time.<sup>33</sup> The reasoning behind it was that it reflected the real portrayal of African Americans and the struggle for a better life that most black families felt.

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<sup>31</sup> FoundationInterviews, “Jimmy Walker on the "Good Times" cast” (*Youtube*, 25 June 2018) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5fWIWcMU6o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5fWIWcMU6o).

<sup>32</sup> FoundationInterviews, “John Amos discusses why he stopped doing Good Times” (*Youtube*, 17 March 2015) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jm36gRGe5bo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jm36gRGe5bo).

<sup>33</sup> Miriam Miranda Chitiga, “Black Sitcoms A Black Perspective” (*Cercle*, August, 2003) 52 [www.cercles.com/n8/chitiga.pdf](http://www.cercles.com/n8/chitiga.pdf).

## 4. Analysis of Specific Sitcoms

### 4.1 *The Jeffersons* - 1970s

*The Jeffersons* first appeared on CBS in 1975, and its last episode was aired in 1985. The show lasted for 11 seasons and until 2012 was the longest-running African American sitcom in the history of television. In addition to that, it was one of the first predominantly black sitcoms after the civil rights movement alongside with *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977) and the already mentioned *Good Times* (1974-1980). The viewers of *The Jeffersons* could have been already familiarised with its characters because the sitcom is a spin-off series of an already existing sitcom *All in the Family* (1971-1979). Both sitcoms were created by Norman Lear who produced many sitcoms in the 1970s. Although most of the creators were white men, one of the actors, Marla Gibbs who played Florence, stated that after table reads of each episode the creators would listen to some remarks the actors had about the ways black people behave.<sup>34</sup>

The sitcom is accompanied by a laugh track, and each episode lasts approximately 20 minutes. Therefore we can consider it to be traditional sitcom. With the focus on the family rather than on the workplace and the relative simplicity of the situations, the sitcom can be categorised as a traditional domcom. The sitcom was filmed in a studio in front of an audience, which is stated at the end of each episode. Therefore the number of possible sets was limited to two apartments of the main characters. These two apartments are located in Manhattan, New York City and belong to Jeffersons and their neighbours, the Willis family. Jeffersons moved to their deluxe apartment from Queens. The story is set at the same time of the airing, because during the first seasons Gerard Ford and later Jimmy Carter, former presidents of the United States, were mentioned. Therefore the story takes place in a timeline that is based on reality.

The show focuses on an African American family which consists of George Jefferson, Louise Jefferson and their son Lionel. The surname which was given to them by the creators resembles black people because according to U.S. Census' data from 2010, nearly 75 per cent of Jeffersons are of African American origin.<sup>35</sup> This was a

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<sup>34</sup> ABC News, "How 'All in the Family' and 'The Jeffersons' changed TV" (*Youtube*, 21 May 2019) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSIZ623frMI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSIZ623frMI).

<sup>35</sup> US Census Bureau, "Frequently Occurring Surnames from the 2010 Census" (*The United States Census Bureau*, 27 Dec. 2016) [www.census.gov/topics/population/genealogy/data/2010\\_surnames.html](http://www.census.gov/topics/population/genealogy/data/2010_surnames.html).

result of Emancipation Proclamation when freed slaves did not have any surnames. Therefore they mostly chose names after previous presidents of the United States. Although the name is typical for African Americans, the sitcom does not show a typical black family. George Jefferson is a successful businessman who owns a chain of dry-cleaning stores. In contrast, Harrell R. Rodgers in *Black Americans and the Feminization of Poverty* refers to data from the Bureau of the Census which states that over 7.5 million African Americans in 1975 lived under the poverty line which is roughly 31.3 per cent of all black Americans.<sup>36</sup>

The main idea of *The Jeffersons* was to display African Americans living their American dream. This is further exclaimed with the theme song ‘Movin’ on up’ that plays at the beginning of each episode. The song was performed with a choir singing in the gospel, which is a genre usually associated with black people. The lyrics, that state: ‘Fish don’t fry in the kitchen; Beans don’t burn on the grill, it took a whole lotta trying just to get up that hill.’ They obviously indicate the financial growth of the Jeffersons themselves. However, since the show aired in the 1970s the song’s additional meaning might be associated with the progress of African American rights in American society. It sends a positive and hopeful message since it evokes that from that moment, even African Americans could rise in society.

#### 4.1.1 Analysis of Characters

The first character that will be analysed is George Jefferson. The first time he appears on the screen, Diane, a maid from the Willis family, mistakes him for Mr Jefferson’s butler because of his African American origin. Diane did not assume that a black man would be wealthy enough to own such an apartment. She additionally states that “He ain’t tall enough to be a basketball player”<sup>37</sup> which points out George’s unathletic physique and that, according to her, only black basketball players can be rich. This once again proves that Jeffersons are not the average black family and their portrayal in the show is not, in this case, stereotypical. George is the one who provides money for his family by owning a chain of dry cleaner stores. Although he is the main protagonist, George often appears as an anti-hero. He is usually overly aggressive and

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<sup>36</sup> Harrell R. Rodgers, “Black Americans and the Feminization of Poverty: The Intervening Effects of Unemployment,” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1987 (JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2784159](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784159)) 403.

<sup>37</sup> “A Friend in Need,” *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 18 January 1975).

arrogant. It appears that George is very ambitious and his only drive is to make money and do whatever it takes to get it. This is addressed in an episode, where George is asked to give a presentation to poor black people on how to get out of poverty.<sup>38</sup> At first, he refuses to attend, however afterwards he sees an opportunity to promote his shops to new customers and therefore changes his mind. Even co-executive producer of the show stated in a contemporary magazine interview by Jack Slater that “on the surface, he is a bigot” but other than that he is a decent sort of human being.<sup>39</sup> In the first seasons, he is completely against his son’s relationship with his mixed-race girlfriend Jenny Willis, who is also the neighbour of the Jeffersons. George despises mixed-race couples and shows his anger and disapproval whenever the Willis family appears. George often teases them with racial insults, calling them: “zebras”<sup>40</sup> or “chocolate and vanilla.”<sup>41</sup> The relationship between George and the Willis family slowly changes by each season and results in close friendship. To mention some positive characteristics, George is very concerned for his family and their future since he does not want them to end up at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy again. In the end, he cares for his friends and has a good heart. Considering stereotypes, before George became wealthy, he lived in Harlem, which is a symbol for African Americans and is associated with their culture when a large concentration of black people moved there. Aside from Harlem, George, as a young man, was sent to jail because of shoplifting which he did to get a present for his mother. This is a secret which he tries to hide from his family. However, he is later blackmailed for it. The stealing tendencies were associated with black people and the stereotyped Zip Coon from the end of the 19th century. To add another stereotype, in one episode, George tries to sneak a watermelon into his apartment, hiding it from Mr Willis. George said, “In whitey's head, watermelon goes along with fried chicken and lazy and tap dancing.”<sup>42</sup> He means that everything white people see are stereotypes they want to relate to him. George does not want to be seen as the stereotype, and he wants to distance himself from them.

When we compare George’s wife, Louise Jefferson to her husband, Louise is calmer and more compassionate to others. Additionally, she frequently apologises for

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<sup>38</sup> “George Won’t Talk,” *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 8 November 1975).

<sup>39</sup> Jack Slater, “Does TV Have a Secret Formula for Blacks?” (*Ebony*, January 1980) 108.

<sup>40</sup> “Meet the Press,” *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 15 March 1975).

<sup>41</sup> “George’s Skeleton,” *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 22 February 1975).

<sup>42</sup> “The Break-Up Part I,” *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 3 January 1976).

her husband's rude behaviour. Louise is the one who settles disputes between George and the Willis family and puts her husband under control. Furthermore, Louise is more considerate towards other African Americans who were not as lucky as her family. This can be seen in the first episode when Louise refuses to hire a maid to take care for the household for her. She does not want to be superior to other African Americans because of her past as a poor woman. She also feels that it is morally wrong. Eventually, she is persuaded to hire a maid, Florence. Even Isabel Sanford, the actress who portrayed Louise, tried to persuade the writers to spice things up a bit because according to her, they wrote Louise to be "as pure as the driven snow"<sup>43</sup> and only George was allowed to be more expressive. Only during one episode, she expresses her exasperation over her husband's purchase of overly expensive watches, saying "350 dollars for a watch? Nigga, please."<sup>44</sup> This was a way to surprise viewers because of the shock that someone as pure as Louise would be able to say something like this. If we consider stereotypical depiction, Louise can be associated with the Mammy stereotype. She is a strong black woman, and although she does not serve as a maid, she usually seems to take care of the household together with her maid. Even before her family became wealthy, she was not working and stayed at home instead to take care of their house in Queens. Additionally, she is the centrepiece of the family. Everyone depends on her and always listens to her advice. As any Mammy, she cares for her child, his future and happiness. Louise is not judgemental towards her son's relationship with his mix-race girlfriend and keeps a friendly relationship with her parents.

Florence, who is employed as a maid in the Jefferson family, will be analysed in this paragraph. She is a slim, sassy African American woman who is thought of as a comic relief character. After her interview for the job application, she is surprised that not one, but two families in the same building are partially African American: "How come we overcame, and nobody told me?"<sup>45</sup> Which resembles the fact that African Americans were suddenly more visible and were seen in higher places in society. She has a friendly relationship with Louise, who is treating her as part of the family and later on in the story, Florence moves in with them. However, Florence frequently answers

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<sup>43</sup> FoundationInterviews, "Isabel Sanford on her "All in the Family" character Louise Jefferson" (*Youtube*, 1 August, 2016) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lg5yMDsIDf4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lg5yMDsIDf4).

<sup>44</sup> "Like Father, Like Son?," *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 5 April 1975).

<sup>45</sup> "A Friend in Need," *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 18 January 1975).

back to George and sometimes ignores George's requests concerning cleaning up, because she feels that he is too bossy and his behaviour is unpleasant. Therefore, she does not let anyone take advantage over her. Once, after being ordered to return to the kitchen from Mr Jefferson, she said: "Mean. Just plain mean. I might as well be working for white folks."<sup>46</sup> In her speech, she complains about George's behaviour and compares working for him to working for white people. She also possibly hints that George's treatment is similar to how slavers treated black people during slavery. Although she is a maid, she is not a typical Mammy caricature. Additionally, she is not strong nor over-weight, and she is not taking care of the children, which are features associated with Mammies. Because of this, Florence's sassy attitude towards her boss and her rebelliousness are the only features which were stereotypical in her character.

Lionel Jefferson, the son of George and Louise, can be seen as the new generation African American. He can be described as an intelligent and open-minded person. He is often reminded of the opportunities that were not available for generations before him. Because of his family's wealth, he has the opportunity to study in college and afterwards becomes an Engineer. He is the first person in the family to have a college degree. Although at first, Lionel wanted to dismiss from college, he later changed his opinion. Lionel acknowledges that he is fortunate for his opportunities and even states that he would have ended up in a gang becoming a thief without being rich.<sup>47</sup> Lionel's story mostly revolves around his relationship with Jenny Willis. He, therefore, overlooks her biracial origin and sees no issue in it. This adds to the idea of Lionel being of the new generation with unprejudiced views. Lionel's character does not evoke any stereotype of African American. This may have been the creators' idea to show that the new generation of African Americans should not reflect stereotypes, and they are the future of American society.

Jenny Willis, Lionel's girlfriend and later his wife is of half African American and half Caucasian descent. She is kind and intelligent, and just like Lionel, she successfully graduates from college. Afterwards, she becomes a fashion designer. Lionel and Jenny marry and have a daughter, Jessica. The child makes George change his mind about Jenny, and he begins to like his daughter-in-law. However, the relationship of the couple does not last, and in the final season, they separate. If we are

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<sup>46</sup> "A Dinner for Harry," *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 13 September 1975).

<sup>47</sup> "George Won't Talk," *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 8 November 1975).

meant to specify Jenny's stereotypical features, she comes close to being associated with the stereotype Tragic Mullata. Although this stereotype is more popular in literary fiction, her character shares several similarities. She sees injustice in the world because she has an older brother who is more white and therefore, he usually passes as a Caucasian. On the other hand, Jenny is more black and therefore hates her brother for it. This sense of injustice and misunderstanding is closely tied to Tragic Mullatas. Additionally, the tragic side of the stereotype may be observed in her marriage and that it eventually results in a divorce. Her story reflects the idea of the stereotype that Tragic Mullatas do not have a happy ending.

The last important African American character is Jenny's mother, Helen Willis. As was already mentioned, Helen is a good friend of Louise Jefferson, and during the first episodes, George is her rival. He mocks her marriage with a white man, Tom Willis. However, she usually responds with calling him 'shorty'. Although she is a housewife, she has a mind of her own. In one episode, she disagrees with voting in an election for a black man just for tokenism. Her husband disagrees with her, saying that African Americans need representation in the government. For a moment, this puts the couple in a difficult situation. Because Helen thinks Tom married her just for representation. Helen does not resemble any specific black stereotype. This may be the result of assimilating into a white family which overshadows her typical black characteristics.

#### **4.1.2 Discussed Topics and their Impact on Society**

During the first episodes of the sitcom, the topics revolved mostly around serious themes, including the contrast between social classes, poverty and luxury. The series was one of the first sitcoms which showed African Americans as an upper-middle-class family. The factor of poverty usually appeared when Jeffersons met their old-time friends from Queens. The presence of the lower class citizens sometimes resulted in mocking their status and their professions, especially if it was as downgrading as butlers or maids. The series mentioned the problem of unemployment among African Americans, which, according to the show, led them to become thieves and burglars. When the 1980s came, the visibility of these problems on the show started to lower.

Another serious topic that was in the spotlight was racism. At first, George Jefferson and his rival Tom Willis did not have a good relationship. The reason was

mostly because of their racial differences. During each argument, George brought up a variety of racial insults. Interestingly, most of the time, only African Americans were the ones who used racial insults. In today's society, racial insults are rarely seen in TV shows which are advertised as family sitcoms. Therefore, the series might have had an impact on people's perspective of racism and the inappropriateness of certain racial insults, especially during primetime hours. Another issue related to racism was discrimination. This was shown when Lionel was almost expelled from school because of a fight he had not initiated. The charge was therefore based on a wrong accusation from the police who had acted based on racial stereotypes. Racial discrimination is an undeniable problem even in today's society. A survey of public opinion, done by NBC News in 2018, states that "about 48 per cent of African-Americans said they had experienced workplace discrimination based on their race."<sup>48</sup> This was the highest percentage of any minority group. *The Jeffersons* tried to present the discrimination as an issue, yet it still exists in society even after 45 years since the episode was released.

A topic that is closely related to racial difference is interracial marriage. *The Jeffersons* was a sitcom that portrayed one of the first biracial couples in the history of television. Historically, biracial marriage was seen as a taboo and only became legal in all states of the United States in 1967. In the show, the parents of the couple showed disapproval for their children to marry another race. However, the newer generation of characters showed a more accepting attitude. Data provided by Frank Newport in Gallup suggest that the approval of marriage between blacks and whites in 1975 was around 30 per cent, on the other hand, when the show ended, it was around 45 per cent of approval.<sup>49</sup> The acceptance was growing by each decade and by 2013, the American society showed 87 per cent of support. Since *The Jeffersons* was one of the most-watched programmes on television which portrayed biracial couples in a positive way, we can assume that the show might have had a favourable impact on the opinions of Americans regarding miscegenation and therefore changed the perception of society.

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<sup>48</sup> Andrew Arengé, et al., "Poll: 64 Percent of Americans Say Racism Remains a Major Problem" (NBC Universal News Group, 30 May 2018) [www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/poll-64-percent-americans-say-racism-remains-major-problem-n877536](http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/poll-64-percent-americans-say-racism-remains-major-problem-n877536).

<sup>49</sup> Frank Newport, "In U.S., 87% Approve of Black-White Marriage, vs. 4% in 1958" (*Gallup.com*, Gallup, 14 March 2018) [news.gallup.com/poll/163697/approve-marriage-blacks-whites.aspx](http://news.gallup.com/poll/163697/approve-marriage-blacks-whites.aspx).

## 4.2 *The Cosby Show* - 1980s

A sitcom which in this thesis represents the 1980s, *The Cosby Show*, was broadcast on NBC. The show had an enormous success among American viewers since its first episode in 1984, the show's popularity remained until its final eighth season in 1992. The sitcom was named after the African American actor Bill Cosby. After the success of *I Spy*, Cosby appeared in his sitcom *The Bill Cosby Show (1969-1971)*, which has no connection to the show in the 1980s. Afterwards, Cosby became one of the most prominent comedy actors of African American descent. Not only did Cosby portray the main character of the sitcom, but he also co-produced the show. Cosby, therefore, actively participated in the making of the show alongside Edwin Weinberger and Michael Jon Leeson. In contrast with *The Jeffersons*, the sitcom had at least one creator of African American origin.

The show's episodes last approximately 20 minutes and they feature a laugh track. Thus it can be considered to be a traditional sitcom. The show focuses on the family rather than on the workplace. The situations discussed are straightforward and domestic. Therefore the sitcom can be further categorised as a traditional domcom, just like *The Jeffersons*. *The Cosby Show* was shot in front of a live studio audience. However, there was a greater variety of sets. These sets resembled different rooms of the family's house. The show was filmed in a studio, however, based on the exterior scenes, the house of the Huxtable family is located in Greenwich Village, New York City. Although, the show used real-life locations, some were fictional, including Hillman College which was referred to as a historically black college in Virginia. This college was later the primary location of a spin-off series called *A Different World (1987-1993)*.

The members of the Huxtable family are the main focus of the show. Huxtables are an African American family of upper-middle class status. In the first episode, the Huxtable family consisted of both parents Cliff and Clair and their four children Denise, Theodore, Vanessa and Rudy. However, in the subsequent episodes, another close member of the family was introduced - the eldest daughter Sondra. Cosby himself has one son and four daughters. Therefore the number of children in the show mirrors the number of Cosby's children in real life. This added an element of authenticity to the show, which was important because it dealt with real family issues anyone could encounter.

*The Cosby Show* was significant because it showed the portrayal of an ideal African American family without any racial stereotypes. Cosby tried to diverge from what American society considered a typical black family. Furthermore, Cliff's profession also resembles Cosby's doctoral degree, which he has in the field of education.

According to Mary Murphy, due to the perfect portrayal of a black family and the characters' professions, the show initially struggled to find its broadcasting network. Murphy stated that "there was the belief that White America would never watch a family show like this. Unless it was a comedy that made fun of or used racial stereotypes."<sup>50</sup> Eventually, *The Cosby Show* was broadcast on NBC and became one of the best-rated TV shows on television.

#### 4.2.1 Analysis of Characters

The first character to be analysed will be Heathcliff 'Cliff' Huxtable. Cliff is an obstetrician. Therefore, viewers can often perceive scene from a hospital seeing Cliff interacting with his patients and their families. John Fiske in *Media Matter* recalled the historical ideas which regarded Black men as sexually driven and suggested that making Cliff a gynaecologist was "a way of rendering Black sexuality safe by medicalizing it and thus of defusing its threat to the white imagination."<sup>51</sup> Cliff is a knowledgeable man considering he successfully received his degree in medicine. However, he is not the first member of the family who received a college degree. His father, Russell Huxtable, attended and graduated from Hillman college which was a fictional college for African Americans purposefully created for the show. Cliff followed the example of his father and attended Hillman as well, which became a family tradition. Cliff always emphasises to his children that education is essential for a successful life. This can be observed in the pilot episode when Cliff is having a conversation with his son Theo who defends his poor grades since he has no plans to attend college.<sup>52</sup> However, Cliff manages to encourage Theo into studying after he demonstrates that the costs of living are financially demanding, and college graduates have a tendency to earn more money.

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<sup>50</sup> "The Cosby Kids," *E! True Hollywood Story* (12 August 2001), accessed from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMjTJgudPHM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMjTJgudPHM).

<sup>51</sup> John Fiske, and Black Hawk Hancock, *Media Matters Race & Gender in U.S. Politics* (Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2016) 118.

<sup>52</sup> "Pilot," *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 20 September 1984).

Considering his personality, Cliff is compassionate, kind and whenever his children are in a difficult situation, he does not hesitate to provide useful advice for them. These characteristics entirely contradict the previous stereotypical depictions of African American male characters. Cliff is not aggressive nor lazy, and therefore his personality does not resemble any of the stereotypical qualities which originated in the 19th century. Furthermore, if we compare Cliff with George from *The Jeffersons*, Cliff is not vulgar, he does not use racial insults and does not show any signs of racist behaviour towards other races. Cliff is also a supportive husband and often encourages his wife in her career. Whenever his wife Clair has an important business at work, Cliff does not hesitate, stays at home and takes care for their sick daughter.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, when Clair needs to prepare for an important court case, Cliff takes care and cooks for the children.<sup>54</sup> Cliff became a model not only for African Americans but every husband and parent. Due to this, in 2009, *TIME* named Cliff Huxtable at the top of the ‘Top 10 TV Dads’ survey, and therefore it confirmed the impact of his character qualities.<sup>55</sup>

Clair Huxtable, Cliff’s wife, is a strong female character who was based on Cosby’s wife, Camille. Clair met her husband in Hillman college while she was studying law. After graduating, Clair became an attorney-at-law. Therefore, she is educated, intelligent and fair. Phylicia Rasha, who portrayed Clair Huxtable, in an *Ebony* interview by Robert E. Johnson, described her character as “a warm, loving mother.”<sup>56</sup> Her character’s strength is that Clair manages to take care of the household and provides advice for her children while additionally having a demanding job. Whenever she is occupied with an important court case, she can rely on her husband with doing the household chores and taking care of the children. Together with her husband, they form an ideal couple and parents. However, whenever she disagrees with her husband’s views, she is never afraid to oppose him. Furthermore, during these disagreements, Clair never uses any insults. She always wins with rational arguments. None of the traits which describe Clair Huxtable do not coincide with any stereotypical characteristic associated with African American women. She does not reflect even the Mammy caricature, although she is the mother figure of the family. In fact, she is the

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<sup>53</sup> “Rudy’s Sick,” *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 20 December 1984).

<sup>54</sup> “Clair’s Case,” *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 21 February 1985).

<sup>55</sup> TIME Staff, “Top 10 TV Dads” (*Time*, Time, 17 September 2009), [entertainment.time.com/2009/09/18/top-10-tv-dads/slide/cliff-huxtable](http://entertainment.time.com/2009/09/18/top-10-tv-dads/slide/cliff-huxtable).

<sup>56</sup> Robert E. Johnson, “TV’s Top Mom and Dad” (*Ebony*, February 1986) 108.

contrary. When compared to Mammies, Clair is not only a caretaker of her children. Moreover, she has a highly paid profession to support her family financially. Additionally, Clair is certainly not desexualised since she frequently wears elegant clothes and cares for her appearance. Clair Huxtable is, without a doubt, a portrayal of a modern mother who is able to not only attend to her children but to work at a highly demanding job at the same time.

As was already said, the Huxtables' eldest child is Sondra who appears for the first time when she returns from Princeton University home for Thanksgiving. According to Mark Whitaker, Sondra's character was created by Cosby to highlight the family's success of raising a child to be a college graduate.<sup>57</sup> Like her mother, Sondra wants to pursue a career in law. However, she marries Elvin Tibideaux, and after their honeymoon, they decide to open a camping store. Therefore, Sondra stops pursuing the law career and concentrates on her new business. Just like her parents, Sondra is intelligent and responsible. Finally, Sondra does not have any characteristics that would resemble the stereotypical depiction of African Americans.

Denise Huxtable is the family's second eldest daughter. Initially, Denise refuses to attend Hillman, however after a conversation with her Grandfather, she changes her mind and follows the family tradition. When Denise leaves for Hillman college, she becomes the main character of a spin-off series *A Different World* which captures the lives of African American students. However, due to her unsuccessful studies, she leaves college and decides to travel instead, being the only person in the family to quit studies. On her travels, Denise meets her future husband Martin Kendall, a Navy man, whom she marries before she introduces him to the family. In the end, she leaves New York together with Martin to Singapore where he is assigned. Denise represents the rebellious daughter with atypical fashion sense. Whitaker states that Cosby's initial idea for Denise was to be "hip, fashion-conscious and a bit flaky."<sup>58</sup> Denise's life decisions might have felt too inconsistent and rushed. We can say that her character struggled to find her true self. Considering stereotypes, Denise does not show any stereotypical traits aside from being rebellious, which was a common quality assigned to African Americans. However, we could argue that it is the nature of teenagers of any race to

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<sup>57</sup> Mark Whitaker, *Cosby: His Life and Times* (Simon & Schuster, 2015) 326.

<sup>58</sup> Whitaker 298.

rebel against their authorities. Therefore Denise's behaviour might not be seen as a black stereotype.

The only son of the Huxtable family, Theodore, will be analysed next. Initially, in the pilot episode, he refuses to attend university. Theo assumes the role of a teenager who is stubborn and rebellious. However, after his father informs him about the importance of education, he slowly changes his beliefs. Just like other family members, Theo was inspired by Cosby's real family - this time by his son Ennis. Theo and Ennis both share the same diagnosis of dyslexia. According to Whitaker, Cosby wanted to inform the viewers that he, as a parent, thought that dyslexia "was a character flaw in Ennis, rather than a mental glitch, as the script called it."<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the whole episode *Theo's Gift* talks about the society's misconceptions about the disorder and provides an optimistic outlook on being diagnosed with it. In the story, Theo learns to deal with his disorder and eventually graduates from New York University. Additionally, he begins an internship at a community centre where he provides helpful information to people with disorders similar to his. Based on Theo's personality traits, his character does not resemble any African American caricature. However, similarly to Denise and other teenagers, especially during the first seasons, his rebellious attitude was noticeable.

Vanessa Huxtable is the second youngest daughter. She is an intelligent girl who is very competitive and successful in school. Furthermore, she is a typical teenage girl whose main concerns are boys and make-up. Sometimes Vanessa shows her rebellious side as well when she refuses to listen to her parent's requests not to wear make-up.<sup>60</sup> Eventually, Vanessa graduates from high school and attends Lincoln University. However, the show ended before she graduated. On the other hand, due to her intelligence, we can assume that she would have finished her studies. Vanessa, yet again represents the typical teenage girl. Therefore, we cannot assume that her occasional rebellious attitude resembles the stereotypical traits of African Americans.

The youngest member of the family is Rudy. Originally, the character was written as a boy, however, after Cosby saw the audition of Keshia Knight Pulliam he changed his mind and Rudy was rewritten as a girl.<sup>61</sup> However, her personality is still influenced by activities that are usually associated with boys, including being a member

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<sup>59</sup> Whitaker 367.

<sup>60</sup> "Mother, May I?," *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 23 October 1986).

<sup>61</sup> Whitaker 298.

of a football team.<sup>62</sup> Due to her innocence and curiosity, she is frequently teased by her older siblings which emphasises her charming personality. Rudy eventually grows up into a teenage girl with the typical teenage problems which resembles her older sister, Vanessa. When the show ended, Rudy was 13 years old. However, we can presume that just like her older siblings, she would have attended college as well. Just like the other members of the family, Rudy does not resemble any stereotypical trait associated with African Americans.

#### **4.2.2 Discussed Topics and their Impact on Society**

At the time of its broadcast, *The Cosby Show* was one of the most-watched TV show in the US. Therefore, the issues and the messages presented in it might have had an impact on its viewers. According to Chitiga's research on the popularity of black sitcoms among African Americans, the responders' ranked it as the most favourite black sitcom.<sup>63</sup>

Noticeably, one of Cosby's main topics he wanted to discuss, was the importance of education. The main characters, Cliff and Clair, were both educated individuals, and due to their careers, they were able to live a happy and content life. Additionally, both actors, Cosby and Rashad, studied at university and received their degrees as well. Therefore, both characters in the show attempted to educate their children that education is essential for their contentment. Eventually, all the children who were old enough attended college, and most of them graduated. Furthermore, Cosby wanted to ensure that even the child actors would be provided with the necessary education to prepare them for their life outside of their acting career. Allen Payne, who played a recurring character, Lance, in an interview mentioned that the great thing about Cosby was that "he talked about getting your life in order, having an education, being articulate and representing yourself well."<sup>64</sup> In *The New York Times* article by Karen de Witt, she mentioned that out of all African American high school graduates "33 per cent were attending college in 1990, up from 26.1 per cent in 1985."<sup>65</sup> Additionally, the

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<sup>62</sup> "Rudy Suits Up," *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 14 November 1985).

<sup>63</sup> Chitiga 50.

<sup>64</sup> "The Cosby Kids," *E! True Hollywood Story* (12 August 2001), accessed from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMjTJgudPHM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMjTJgudPHM).

<sup>65</sup> Karen De Witt, "Minority College Attendance Rose in Late 80's, Report Says" (*The New York Times*, 20 January 1992) [www.nytimes.com/1992/01/20/us/minority-college-attendance-rose-in-late-80-s-report-says.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/20/us/minority-college-attendance-rose-in-late-80-s-report-says.html).

increase was most significant among African American women. Although the increase might have been caused by greater recruitment of colleges and universities, the show's emphasis on the importance of education could have influenced decisions of African American high school graduates to attend college. This is supported by Phylicia Rashad's interview where she remembers that she received many letters from young girls who thanked her and said, they were going to be lawyers just like her character.<sup>66</sup>

However, one of *The Cosby Show's* main concerns was to break the stereotypes of the Black family and to display its characters as idyllic family models. These models were essential for the harmony in the family. Due to this, many American families, regardless of race, could identify themselves and learn about their own family values. Phylicia Rashad recalls in an interview that she would often meet the fans of the show who would express their gratitude "for helping to save their marriage or to understand how to work with their children."<sup>67</sup> Additionally, due to the show's universality, people of different races, ethnicities or social classes could see themselves in the characters. In the same interview, Rashad states that the show's importance was to demonstrate that "people are much more alike than we could ever be different."<sup>68</sup>

In the 2010s, Bill Cosby was accused of sexual assault reported by numerous women. The assaults were supposed to span over decades. In 2018, Cosby was proven guilty of three of these assaults and was imprisoned. As a result of the allegations, many TV networks rejected to broadcast reruns of the show. Therefore, the message of the show might not influence the future generations of African Americans because its reputation is tarnished.

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<sup>66</sup> FoundationInterviews, "Phylicia Rashad on 'The Cosby Show'" (*Youtube*, 10 September 2008), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qij\\_4pytnD0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qij_4pytnD0).

<sup>67</sup> FoundationInterviews, "Phylicia Rashad on 'The Cosby Show.'"

<sup>68</sup> FoundationInterviews, "Phylicia Rashad on 'The Cosby Show.'"

### 4.3 *Atlanta* - 2010s

After the success of *The Cosby Show*, there has been a tendency to create new black sitcoms which would try to imitate the accomplishment of its predecessor. The popular black sitcoms of the early 1990s included *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), starring Will Smith, *Martin* (1992-1997) or *Living Single* (1993-1998). However, James Roman in *From Daytime to Primetime* states that black sitcoms were unable to connect with the white audience who lost interest in them. Therefore, the decline of the black sitcom was dramatic since 1997.<sup>69</sup> Afterwards, there was only a small number of new black sitcoms on TV.

In 2016, American network FX released the first episodes of a new black sitcom, *Atlanta*. The show was produced by Donald Glover, who also portrays the main character, Earn. Glover is not only associated with show-producing and comedy, but he is also a rapper who uses a pseudonym Childish Gambino. In 2018, Glover released his song ‘This is America’ alongside with his music video directed by Hiro Murai who also partakes in making of the show. The music video shows the contrast between comic dancing and the violence that is happening in the background. This is possibly a critique of society who overlooks the serious problems and focuses on the entertainment industry instead. The same contrast between comedy and violence is presented in *Atlanta* as well.

The sitcom tells a story of a young African American man, Earnest. Earn has a troubling life and, symbolically to his name, struggles to earn money for his family. However, he sees an opportunity in his cousin, a rising celebrity of rap scene, ‘Paper Boi’. The show focuses on the rap scene, which is frequently tied to the black community, and it deals with critical social issues, including gun violence, drug dealing and poverty. As the title suggests, the sitcom is set in Atlanta, Georgia where Glover himself grew up. Due to the opportunities for African Americans in the political, economic and educational sector, Atlanta has been known from the 1970s as the “Black Mecca of the South” which was mentioned by Phyl Garland in his *Ebony* article.<sup>70</sup> Because of these opportunities, the city attracted many black Americans, and as a result, the majority of Atlanta’s population is of African American descent. Therefore, Glover

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<sup>69</sup> James Roman, *From Daytime to Primetime: The History of American Television Programs* (ABC-CLIO, 2005) 71.

<sup>70</sup> Phyl Garland, “Atlanta: Black Mecca of the South” (*Ebony*, August 1971) 152.

purposefully chose a setting in which he grew up in and which is a cultural centre of Black Americans to create a believable and authentic story.

*Atlanta* is not a regular black sitcom. The sets are not limited and change regularly, even with many exterior sets. Due to this, the show could not have been shot in front of a studio audience. Additionally, the laugh track is not included in any of its episodes. However, based on the comic elements, a limited set of characters and the time each episode lasts, we can characterise *Atlanta* as a modern sitcom. The sitcom revolves around a family only minimally. However, it focuses more on the music industry and its characters. Furthermore, Glover wanted to be more experimental and included an episode that was centred around a fictional television broadcaster Black American Network. The episode featured fake commercials and an interview with one of the main characters, 'Paper Boi,' who discussed current social issues.<sup>71</sup>

#### **4.3.1 Analysis of Characters**

The main protagonist of the show, as was already mentioned, is Earnest Marks. After he withdrew from the university, he begins to earn money in a low-paying job that does not offer any career growth. However, he needs to provide money for his daughter Lottie whom he has with his girlfriend Van. The relationship between the couple is unfavourable and unstable. Earn sees a chance when his cousin suddenly becomes famous through releasing a hit song 'Paper Boi.' Therefore, Earn wants to become his manager. Earn's character represents the lives of poor American people. Although he can earn a small amount of money to pay for his necessities, afterwards, he has no money at all. This creates a vicious circle from which poor people cannot escape. Although Earn withdrew from college, he is still an intelligent and hard-working man. Furthermore, he cares for his family and wants a better life for them. If we consider Earn's character from the perspective of black stereotypes, his hard-working nature, gentleness and intellect do not coincide with set stereotypes of African Americans. However, his lack of money and the inability to raise a child prove otherwise. Glover, in an interview, stated that for most contemporary shows "stereotypes exist, but the way they exist is not how they are to most people. They are usually very cartoonish."<sup>72</sup> The main goal of the writers was to make characters that are real, believable, and which

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<sup>71</sup> "B.A.N.," *Atlanta* (FX, 11 October, 2016).

<sup>72</sup> NPR Staff, "Donald Glover Explores A Surreal Feel In 'Atlanta'" (NPR, 17 September 2016) [www.npr.org/2016/09/17/494390868/donald-glover-explores-a-surreal-feel-in-atlanta](http://www.npr.org/2016/09/17/494390868/donald-glover-explores-a-surreal-feel-in-atlanta).

have a depth to their personalities. Overall, because of Earn's complex and realistic personality, we can assume that he does not resemble any stereotypical caricature of African Americans. However, some features of his character can be stereotypically associated with black men.

The only female character that appears regularly in the show is Van. She is Earn's girlfriend. However, their relationship is rather problematic, which often results in breaking up and making up. The only person who is able to connect them is their baby daughter, Lottie. Van used to be an elementary school teacher. She lost her job because she had confessed to her superior that she had smoked marijuana before being drug tested. If we focus on her personality, although, Earn jokingly describes Vanessa as the typical angry and sassy black woman, her character is more profound than that.<sup>73</sup> Vanessa is certainly intelligent; however, because of her recklessness, she lost the only source of income for her family. Additionally, Van's views appear to be realistic because she does not believe in the success of Earn's new career opportunity. One of the writers, Stefani Robinson, in an interview by Lanre Bakare, stated that Vanessa was created to represent black women and their experience in Atlanta.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, she mentioned that "it was important to see her do things by herself."<sup>75</sup> The writers wanted to create a strong female character who is an independent single mother. Therefore, regardless of the small number of stereotypical traits, Van is not a single stereotypical caricature of African American women.

Another character to be analysed will be Alfred Miles. Alfred is a rapper and performs under his pseudonym 'Paper Boi'. Before he became successful in the music industry, Alfred earned his money from drug dealing. After his success, Earn suddenly starts to befriend his relative. Therefore, Alfred believes that Earn is only using him for his success as a rap celebrity. Alfred is suspicious because they stopped seeing each other, although they had been close friends during childhood. However, eventually, Alfred decides to appoint Earn to be his manager. Glover stated that 'Paper Boi' was written to resemble "the archetypical dope-boy rapper" whom he used to listen to while

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<sup>73</sup> "Go for Broke," *Atlanta* (FX, 13 September 2016).

<sup>74</sup> Lanre Bakare, "The Writers of FX's Atlanta: 'We're Not Interested in Being Sesame Street'" (*The Guardian*, 2 November 2016), [www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/nov/02/atlanta-fx-donald-glover-bill-oreilly-black-lives](http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/nov/02/atlanta-fx-donald-glover-bill-oreilly-black-lives).

<sup>75</sup> Lanre Bakare, "The Writers of FX's Atlanta: 'We're Not Interested in Being Sesame Street.'"

he was growing up.<sup>76</sup> However, he wanted to show a human side to this character by the troubled personality of Alfred. Therefore, we can see the contrast between the idolised gangster rapper ‘Paper Boi’ whom his fans admire, and the regular man Alfred who starts to despise his fame and the character he created. Brian Tyree Henry, who portrayed Alfred, in an interview for *Los Angeles Times*, stated that it was essential to highlight Alfred’s kind-heartedness in the relationship with his cousin, which eventually morphed into a brotherly bond.<sup>77</sup> He also stated that in the current shows the stereotypical ‘Paper Bois’ are visible. However, we do not see the deeper portrayal of the more relatable Alfred.<sup>78</sup> Regarding the stereotypes, Alfred is the archetypical black rapper who has connections to crime and sometimes appears to be lazy. On the other hand, we can see a more complex character who struggles to reconnect with his cousin and, because of his career choices, suffers from depression. Although some of his features might appear stereotypical, we cannot associate Alfred with any stereotypical caricature of African Americans because the multi-layered characters usually do not correlate with them.

#### **4.3.2 Discussed Topics and the Reflection of Society**

*Atlanta* discusses many critical social topics which concern today’s American society. Although, it may be currently challenging to discuss the show’s impact, we can nevertheless see the attempt of the creators to highlight these problems, which may result in public awareness and possible solutions for them.

The main issue the show focused on was the contrast between poverty and wealth which resembles the topic of *The Jeffersons*. Additionally, the main character of *Atlanta* withdrew from the university. Therefore, this suggests the importance of education for a better life which was established in *The Cosby Show*. The data provided by the U.S. Census in *People in Poverty by Selected Characteristics: 2018* suggest, the percentage of African Americans who live below poverty is 21.7 per cent.<sup>79</sup> This is the

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<sup>76</sup> “Donald Glover Challenges Stereotypes About Rappers In ‘Atlanta’” (NPR, 1 November 2016) [www.npr.org/2016/11/01/500225189/donald-glover-challenges-stereotypes-about-rappers-in-atlanta?t=1587124098877](http://www.npr.org/2016/11/01/500225189/donald-glover-challenges-stereotypes-about-rappers-in-atlanta?t=1587124098877).

<sup>77</sup> Los Angeles Times, “Atlanta’s Brian Tyree Henry says Alfred ‘Paper Boi’ Miles is who you want in your corner” (*Youtube*, 8 May 2017) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IivL97T3OXQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IivL97T3OXQ).

<sup>78</sup> Los Angeles Times, “Atlanta’s Brian Tyree Henry says Alfred ‘Paper Boi’ Miles is who you want in your corner.”

<sup>79</sup> US Census Bureau, “Income and Poverty in the United States: 2018” (*The United States Census Bureau*, 17 Sept. 2019) [www.census.gov/library/publications/2019/demo/p60-266.html](http://www.census.gov/library/publications/2019/demo/p60-266.html).

highest number for any race in the United States. *Atlanta* further emphasises that it is difficult to overcome poverty and that it is still an enormous problem in society, especially for African Americans.

Although it is unusual for comedies to address issues, including gun violence and police brutality, *Atlanta* displayed these issues usually in a comic or satirical manner. In the first episode, the main characters are involved in a shooting incident and therefore, are arrested and sent to jail. With the scenes in jail, the writers criticise the bureaucracy and the treatment of arrested people.

Another topic which was discussed was race. In one of the episodes, the creators of the show played with the idea of including a famous real-life celebrity. However, the viewers' expectations were subverted when they could see Justin Bieber played by a black actor. The personality and attitude of the celebrity relatively resembled the one of the real pop idol. The writers tried to subvert the viewers' expectations but also asked the question whether the pop star would be treated equally regardless of his race.

Satirically, the term 'trans-racial' was mentioned in one of the episodes. The episode featured an interview of a young black man who considered himself to be a 35-year-old white man from Colorado. "Why am I not getting the respect I deserve? And then it just hit me. I am white."<sup>80</sup> This might have been the writers' comment on the fact that black people are still treated differently and are often being discriminated. But also highlighted the modern trends of discovering one's identity.

Another subject related to the race was the use of whiteface. Whiteface was used two times in the show. At one time, a black child in an elementary school was wearing it while attending his class. The child stayed mute and was looking at his teacher and later into the camera. The reason why he was wearing it was not specified in the show. The uncertainty emphasised the scene's strange and uneasy atmosphere. In the second season, whiteface appeared again. This time performed by Donald Glover himself, who played the character of Teddy Perkins. The whole episode was inspired by horror movies filled with tense and disturbing scenes. Additionally, the viewer slowly uncovers Teddy's mysterious personality and his life. Whiteface was used to highlight the disturbing atmosphere and to possibly refer to the once frequently used blackface, which was undeniably uncomfortable for African Americans to watch.

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<sup>80</sup> "B.A.N.," *Atlanta* (FX, 11 October 2016).

## 5. Conclusion

Situational comedies became one of the most popular genres on television in the United States. With its type of humour, sitcoms were centred around a set of characters that are simple and relatable. Therefore, sitcoms frequently relied on stereotypical depictions. The goal of this thesis was to describe the historical stereotypes of African Americans and applying them to the stereotypes used in sitcoms in different decades after the civil rights movement. The main focus was on the shows *The Jeffersons*, *The Cosby Show* and *Atlanta*.

The first stereotypes of African Americans emerged with slavery. However, with the increased number of minstrel shows and theatres, these stereotypes were more visible and were used to ridicule the minorities' position during slavery and after Emancipation Proclamation, especially in the Southern states. One of the most prominent archetypes was Sambo, though the caricature of Jim Crow, and Mammy for black men and women respectively. The Sambo caricature was characterised by many negative traits, including laziness, unintelligence, dishonesty, and stealing tendencies. On the other hand, Mammies were the typical servants who took care of the white family's children and did all the house chores, yet they lost their black identity. Additional characteristics which were associated with African Americans were strong, athletic features with rebelliousness for men and angry, sassy attitude for women. It is also important to mention that most of the black caricatures were pleased with being slaves and servants, which was made to justify their position without the feeling of guilt.

When comedies first appeared on television through TV shows and movies, African Americans were mostly depicted as butlers, servants or menial job workers. The portrayal of black people provided for many people the only interaction with this minority, and therefore, the negative stereotypes became the only image they associated with African Americans. These stereotypes gradually changed when a number of TV broadcasters started to implement policies which would forbid programmes with offensive racial stereotypes. For this reason, many creators excluded minorities from their programmes to ensure not being revoked by their TV broadcasters.

The civil rights movement, which received enormous media coverage, helped to raise the public's perception of the problems African Americans faced. Afterwards, the representation of black characters started to change once again. This time, many

viewers and critics of TV shows *Julia* and *I Spy* criticised the black characters for being shown without flaws and were a mix of white and black characters. On the other hand, another show *Good Times* showed African Americans struggling to overcome poverty which resembled the lives of many black Americans at the time.

The first show which was analysed was *The Jeffersons*. The show revolved around the idea of African Americans living their American dream. It focused on the Jefferson family who overcame poverty and became rich. At first, the characters were displayed with stereotypical features. George Jefferson, the father of the family, was frequently seen being angry and racist towards his neighbour Mr Willis. His wife, Louise, although she was not a maid, she resembled the Mammy stereotype. The younger generation depicted in the show was less stereotypical and had more liberal views. The show was one of the first programmes to include an interracial couple. Some characters looked down upon them. However, we could argue that due to their positive representation in the show, the rates of acceptance of interracial marriage elevated in American society. Although, the show displayed a wealthy African American family, it indicated that poverty is an enormous problem in society and leads to criminal activity.

The following show which was analysed was *The Cosby Show*. The main goal of the show was to present an upper-middle-class family of educated African Americans. Bill Cosby, one of the creators of the show, wanted his characters to be represented without any racial stereotypes. He believed that people's everyday problems are identical regardless of their skin colour. Although it did not issue serious problems, including poverty among African Americans, Bill Cosby wanted to highlight the importance of education. Not only did the main characters' children attend college, but Cosby also wanted the child actors playing those roles to concentrate on their studies as well. The impact of the show could have possibly changed the perspective of many African Americans since after the show has ended, there was an increase of African American high school graduates applying for college.

The last show analysed was *Atlanta*. The show revolved around the music industry and the life of the main character Earn. Although the show revolved around modern stereotypes of African American rappers and gangsters, it still tried to present its characters with depth to their personality. According to the creators, the characters are never just one stereotype, and although they may resemble some features, they are still complex characters. For instance, some characters were college drop-outs trying to

overcome poverty, rappers who regretted their life choices and became depressed or teacher who made the wrong choices in their life and became unemployed. Furthermore, the sitcoms discussed society's current issues which involved racism, poverty, gun violence and drug dealing. Although it is too early to present the impact of the show, we can say that the creators tried to highlight these issues for possible conversations and solutions for these problems.

In contrast with the early 2000s, black sitcoms and other genres with predominantly African American cast are currently common and will possibly continue to do so. This popularity may be associated with the current trend of many shows attempting to diversify their characters. Therefore, we can predict that the number of African American characters in TV shows will increase. Furthermore, the rising number of African American TV creators can be noticed. As we can see in the recent shows, black sitcoms may not maintain its traditional form. However, they will continue to focus on the topics central to their minority.

In summary, the stereotypical depictions of African Americans changed drastically over the past century and mirrored the changes in American society. With the influence of black creators and writers who partook in the creation of the shows, we can witness the loss of stereotypical features in their characters. Although the creators do not deny some of the stereotypes being to an extent accurate, they make the characters more complex to devoid their characters being associated with a single stereotypical caricature. On the other hand, the viewers can still observe the recurring theme of poverty and education in all of the shows analysed. Therefore, these issues are still contemporary for many African Americans and require discussion.

## Resumé

Situační komedie se v minulém století staly jedním z nejpobulárnějších televizních žánrů ve Spojených státech. Sitcomy mají typický humor, který se soustředí na určitou skupinu postav. Tyto postavy jsou většinou vytvořeny, aby u diváka vyvolaly pocit jednoduchosti a všednosti. Z tohoto důvodu tvůrci sitcomů často spoléhali na stereotypické vyobrazení. Cílem této práce bylo popsat historické stereotypy Afroameričanů a následně je porovnat s vyobrazenými stereotypy v sitcomech v rozdílných dekádách především po úspěšném afroamerickém hnutí za občanská práva. Práce je zaměřena na seriály *The Jeffersons*, *The Cosby Show* a *Atlanta*.

První stereotypy Afroameričanů se začaly objevovat společně s otroctvím. S nástupem velkého počtu potulných kabaretů a divadelních her se tyto stereotypy začaly zneužívat pro zesměšňování této menšiny nejen během doby otroctví, ale také po prohlášení o osvobození otroků a to zejména v jižních státech. Jedním z typických mužských stereotypů byl „Sambo“, který byl často spojován s karikaturou Jimem Crowem. „Mammy“ byly karikatury typické pro Afroameričanky. „Sambové“ byly často vyobrazováni jako líní, neinteligentní, nepoctiví s tendencemi ke krádežím. Naproti tomu, „Mammy“ byly typické služebnice, které se často staraly o bělošské rodiny a tím svou černošskou identitu. Dalšími vlastnostmi se kterými byli černoši spojováni byla silná, atletická postava s tendencemi vzbouřit se. Naopak černošky byly často zobrazovány jako zuřivé a drzé. Je důležité zdůraznit, že tyto karikatury byly šťastné a spokojené se svým zotročením, a to z toho důvodu, aby se předešlo pocitu viny ze strany bělochů.

Když se na televizních obrazovkách začaly objevovat první komedie v seriálové a filmové podobě, Afroameričané byli často viděni jako sluhové nebo zaměstnanci podřadných prací. Pro mnoho Američanů zobrazení v televizi představovalo jedinou interakci s touto menšinou, proto se negativní stereotypy staly jediným faktorem, který ovlivnil jejich mínění o Afroameričanech. Stereotypy se postupně mírnily, jelikož někteří provozovatelé televizního vysílání začali provádět opatření, která omezovala programy s ofenzivními rasovými stereotypy. Z tohoto důvodu se mnoho tvůrců rozhodlo menšiny vyloučit ze svých pořadů, aby se zamezilo případnému zrušení pořadu.

Hnutí za občanská práva, které získalo enormní mediální pozornost, pomohlo zvýšit povědomí veřejnosti o problémech, kterým Afroameričané čelili. Poté se opět

reprezentace černochů začala měnit. Tentokrát spousta diváků a kritiků odsuzovala seriály *Julia* a *I Spy* za údajně bezchybné vyobrazení Afroameričanů, které přirovnávali ke kombinaci bělochů a černochů. Naopak, sitcom *Good Times* ukazoval Afroameričany, kteří se snaží překonat chudobu, což připomínalo životy mnoha amerických černochů té doby.

První seriál, který byl v této práci zkoumán byl *The Jeffersons*. Sitcom se soustředil na myšlenku, ve které Afroameričané žijí svůj americký sen. Seriál se zaměřil na rodinu Jeffersonů, kteří překonali chudobu a zbohatli. Zpočátku, byly postavy zobrazeny se stereotypními rysy. George Jefferson, otec rodiny, byl často rozzlobený, agresivní a choval se rasisticky vůči svému sousedovi panu Willisovi. Jeho žena, Louise, přestože nebyla služebnou, často svou povahou připomínala stereotyp 'Mammy.' Mladší generace postav byla v seriálu méně stereotypní a představovala liberálnější názory. Seriál byl jeden z prvních, ve kterém se vyskytoval mezirasový pár. Některé postavy tento pár odsuzovaly. Mohly bychom však tvrdit, že v důsledku pozitivního vyobrazení této rodiny se zvýšila míra přijetí mezirasových manželství v americké společnosti. Přestože seriál ukazoval život bohaté afroamerické rodiny, také naznačoval, že chudoba je ve společnosti enormním problémem a často vede ke kriminální činnosti.

Následující seriál, který byl analyzován, byl *The Cosby Show*. Hlavním cílem sitcomu bylo představit vzdělanou rodinu Afroameričanů střední až vyšší třídy. Tvůrce seriálu Bill Cosby chtěl, aby jeho postavy nevykazovaly žádné rasové stereotypy. Cosby věřil, že každodenní problémy lidí jsou identické bez ohledu na jejich barvu pleti. Přestože seriál neukazoval vážné společenské problémy, cílem Cosbyho bylo zdůraznit důležitost vzdělání. Nejen, že všechny děti hlavních postav nakonec navštěvovaly vysokou školu, ale Cosby také chtěl, aby se dětští herci hrající tyto role rovněž soustředili na jejich budoucnost a studium na vysoké škole. Dopad seriálu tedy mohl změnit pohled mnoha Afroameričanů na vzdělání, jelikož vysoké školy zaznamenaly nárůst afroamerických absolventů středních škol, kteří se ucházeli o studium na vysoké škole.

Posledním analyzovaným seriálem byla *Atlanta*. Seriál se převážně soustředil na hudební průmysl a na život hlavní postavy, Earna. Ačkoli se seriál zaměřoval na moderní stereotypy rapperů a gangsterů, zároveň také usiloval o prezentaci svých postav s důrazem na složitost jejich osobností. Podle tvůrců, jejich postavy nikdy nejsou

pouze stereotypem, přestože se některým stereotypům mohou podobat, jsou to spíše komplexní osobnosti. Například jedna z hlavních postav předčasně ukončila studium na vysoké škole a nyní překonává chudobu, další je rapper, který lituje svých rozhodnutí a žije v depresích a v neposlední řadě učitelka, která učinila špatná rozhodnutí a stala se nezaměstnanou. Seriál také pojednával o aktuálních problémech ve společnosti, které se týkají rasismu, chudoby, násilí se zbraněmi a obchodu s drogami. Ačkoli je na zhodnocení dopadu pořadu na současnou společnost příliš brzy, můžeme s jistotou říci, že se tvůrci pokusili tyto problémy zviditelnit pro možné diskuze k řešení těchto problémů.

Na rozdíl od prvního desetiletí dvacátého prvního století jsou v současné době afroamerické sitcomy, ale i jiné žánry s převážně afroamerickým obsazením běžné a pravděpodobně budou i nadále. Tato popularita může být spojena se současným trendem mnoha pořadů, které se snaží diverzifikovat své postavy. Můžeme proto předpovídat, že počet afroamerických postav v televizních pořadech poroste. Kromě toho si můžeme všimnout rostoucího počtu afroamerických tvůrců. Afroamerické sitcomy si však nebudou udržovat tradiční podobu tohoto žánru, což můžeme pozorovat v současných pořadech. Budou se však i nadále snažit o prezentaci černochů bez stereotypů a zaměřovat se na témata klíčová pro jejich menšinu.

Stereotypní vyobrazení Afroameričanů se během minulého století drasticky změnilo a odráželo změny v americké společnosti. Díky množství afroamerických režisérů a tvůrců, kteří se podílí na výrobě svých seriálů, můžeme pozorovat ztrátu stereotypních rysů postav. Ačkoli tvůrci nezpochybňují pravost některých stereotypů, snaží se vytvářet komplexní postavy, aby se zbavili spojování se stereotypickými karikaturami. Na druhou stranu, ve všech analyzovaných sitcomech mohou diváci pozorovat opakující se témata chudoby a důležitosti vzdělání. Tato témata jsou pro mnoho Afroameričanů nadále aktuální a vyžadují diskuzi a případné řešení.

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## **Annotation**

**Author:** Štěpán Svoboda

**Faculty:** Faculty of Arts, Palacký University, Olomouc

**Department:** Department of English and American Studies

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## **Abstract**

The thesis defines what a situational comedy is, how it was created, and how it evolved over time. The main focus is placed on stereotypes of African Americans created during the age of slavery. These stereotypes are later contrasted with the portrayal of African Americans in three American black sitcoms in the 1970s - *The Jeffersons*, the 1980s - *The Cosby Show* and today - *Atlanta*. While focusing on the specific situational comedies, the portrayal of each prominent character was examined and compared with stereotypical features associated with African Americans. The thesis also examines the topics discussed in the shows and discusses whether they had an impact on American society.

## **Anotace**

**Autor:** Štěpán Svoboda

**Fakulta:** Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Palackého v Olomouci

**Katedra:** Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

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## **Abstrakt**

Bakalářská práce definuje žánr situační komedie a popisuje vznik a vývoj tohoto žánru. Práce se zaměřuje na stereotypy Afroameričanů, které se začaly vyskytovat během otroctví. Tyto stereotypy jsou poté porovnávány se zastoupením Afroameričanů ve třech amerických černošských sitcomech minulého století v sedmdesátých letech - *The Jeffersons*, v osmdesátých letech - *The Cosby Show* a sitcom, který představoval v této práci současnost byla *Atlanta*. V těchto sitcomech jsem provedl rozbor vyobrazení každé významné postavy a srovnal jsem je se stereotypickými vlastnostmi, které jsou spojovány s Afroameričany. Práce dále zkoumá témata těchto seriálů a zjišťuje, zda měly dopad na americkou společnost.