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Where Are Our Shows: An Exploration of Black Representation in Television

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During the 1990s, Fox, ABC, NBC, and CBS collectively produced 40 black sitcoms. But from 2000 to 2010, those same networks only broadcasted 11 black sitcoms. One of the focuses of my research is to deduce why the difference in shows produced in these decades is so drastic.

Author and professor of sociology Herman Gray addresses this issue in “Where Have All the Black Shows Gone?” Gray examines the flourish of black shows being made for network television from 1979-1996. But after the 1996 Telecommunications Act, major companies deregulate, creating a major change for television. Gray claims that television networks refocus on sustaining the viewership of niche markets, rather than trying to appeal to a vast general audience. Leading into the early 2000s, Fox maintains its black audience through its production of low budget situation comedies. While networks such as NBC and CBS focus on curating programming for “white middle-class professionals.”

The second focus for my research is finding out if the current climate in television is leaning towards the model of the 1990s where there was a multitude of shows depicting different black experiences in America.

Representation is a current issue that is consciously being addressed across all aspects of life, be it at the university level, in the corporate field, or on television. Due to viewer backlash through social media and black creators taking a stand, television networks are now making a conscious effort to pick up shows that feature actors, writers, and creators from diverse backgrounds. While major networks are not producing as much black content as they did in the 1990s, subscription services and more niche networks allow for there to be a lot more shows featuring the black experience.

Lastly, my research focuses on answering the question of what can be done to prevent us from having another decade that poorly represents a variety of black stories on television.

The methodology for my project includes watching black television shows, reading interviews with professionals from black shows, tracking the amount of people of color working on these shows, and reading articles on diversity and television.

From my research, I conclude that the main reason for the lack of black shows in the 2000s is the rebranding of networks like NBC, ABC, and CBS. Shows such as *Sister, Sister* are the result of this. After its first two seasons with ABC, the show relocates to the WB; a smaller network with an initially black target audience.

In the future I plan to use this research to start my honors thesis. Being a music industry major, I plan on incorporating a musical element to my current research on black representation in television. I will study the use of music and appearances from musical guests within black shows. Once I identify the uses, I will track whether or not being featured on these shows impacts the charting of songs and overall artist popularity.

Works Cited

Gray, Herman. "Where Have All the Black Shows Gone?" *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, by Harry J. Elam and Kennell Jackson, University of Michigan Press, 2010.