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## **Black or Black-ish: Decoding Black-ish and Its Place in the Conversation of Diversity**

Jasmine Vickers  
*Syracuse University*

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## Abstract

Diversity in television in film is an ongoing debate. The recent exclusions of minority-led television shows and films from award shows like the Emmys and Oscars have ignited complaints and debates from inside and outside the entertainment industry. Some networks responded with more inclusive programs and diverse cast leads and cast members. In 2013, Paul Lee, former ABC executive, introduced a diversity initiative that was a part of a rebranding strategy for the network, and to show different experiences in America. The initiative resulted in three new shows for the 2014-2015 season: *Black-ish*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, and *Cristela*. All shows featured minority leads and predominately minority casts. However, diversity is about more than just placing minorities in leading roles. There needs to be a showcase of the different cultural backgrounds, and experiences of different minority groups. That includes discussing racism, significant cultural events, and minorities' interactions with one another and the majority White community.

Sitcoms are a part of the culture industry. According to Adorno, the culture industry exists solely to sell products and a lifestyle. In addition to that, sitcoms are designed to make the world simple and laughable. Also, sitcoms are not designed to evoke deep thought or conversations amongst the viewers that serious subjects like racism may result in. Sitcoms are in direct conflict with the goal of the diversity initiative. This research focuses on *Black-ish*, and how it shows diversity from the Black American perspective, and seeing how the culture industry may or may not influence the execution of the diversity initiative.

*Keywords:* *Black-ish*, culture industry, ABC, diversity in television, stereotypes, Black culture, sitcoms, sitcom formula

BLACK OR *BLACK-ISH*: DECODING *BLACK-ISH* AND ITS PLACE IN THE  
CONVERSATION OF DIVERSITY

by

Jasmine Vickers

B.A., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2012

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Chapter One: Introduction

It is no secret that there is a shortage of minority representation in television and film. Every year, UCLA's Bunche Center for African American Studies releases a content analysis of minority and female representation in all areas of the television and film industries, from casting, to studio employment to the production, and executive levels. In the 2015-2016 season, minorities made up only 18.7% of lead roles on broadcast scripted television shows, and of that Black Americans only made up 17% of lead roles on broadcast scripted television shows (Hunt, Ramon, Tran, Sargent, & Roychoudhury, 2018).

This shortage of minority representation has drawn criticism from those outside and inside the entertainment industry. This led to the #OscarsSoWhite backlash of 2015 and 2016, after there were questionable exclusions of minorities from Academy Award nominations. Minority actors like Benicio Del Toro, David Oyelowo, and Will Smith, and films *Selma* (2015) and *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) which featured predominately Black casts, were shut out of the Academy Awards even though the films and actors received critical acclaim (Grossman, 2015; Keegan & Zeitchik, 2016).

Networks, like ABC, were forced to respond to the public outcry. In 2013, ABC announced a new diversity initiative that included new shows with predominately minority-led cast. Former ABC executive Paul Lee discussed the rebranding of the network's programming with the *New York Times*, stating "We did go out with a mission this year to reflect America" (Carter, 2014). Paul Lee also stated that ABC sought to include all American voices in this new diversity programming initiative. Lee explained that this diversity initiative was to provide an accurate, complex portrayal of minority life as a part of a larger ABC rebranding strategy to gain more viewership, as ABC was struggling in key demographic of 18 to 49-year-olds (Littleton,



2015; Malloy, 2013). Lee stated “We have a clear brand, a refocused brand for a broadcast network. We have built consistency and flow into the network and built the schedule brick by brick. We had to find authentic show runners with passionate voices and let them tell very specific, very authentic stories (Littleton, 2014).” The programs created to fulfill this mission for the 2014-2015 fall season were *Black-ish* (2014), *Fresh Off the Boat* (2014), and *Cristela* (2014); *Cristela* was cancelled after the first season due to underwhelming ratings, while *Black-ish* and *Fresh Off the Boat* received stellar ratings and generally positive reviews. This study focuses on *Black-ish*, and the execution to the diversity initiative as demonstrated in the program.

### **Brief overview of *Black-ish***

*Black-ish* was created by Kenya Barris, one of very few Black showrunners in Hollywood. Barris loosely based the show after his own experiences of living with his family in suburban Los Angeles. Barris contended that he wanted *Black-ish* to break down stereotypes about Black people, and give a glimpse into the experiences of Black families, and that the show would not shy away from racially charged subject matter, such as racial profiling (Tigget, 2014).

Barris stated that he recognizes that his children have grown up in a “post-Obama” society, and their experiences dealing with race have been much different than his. He saw his children liking different music and having diverse experiences in defining their version of Blackness. This led him to explore how Black culture is no longer relegated to just Black people. Also, Barris believes that it is important to highlight the experiences of Black families in America, and the cultural differences between Black and White families, and the experience of living in a majority White environment. He explains that it is important that other ethnicities understand stereotypes, and that every Black person doesn’t align with those stereotypes, and for

White Americans to understand and acknowledge their own prejudices, even if their intent isn't malicious (Williams, 2014).

To build the vision that he had for *Black-ish*, Barris wanted to change the landscape of how the show was created, and decided upon having a diverse production team for his show. Barris felt that it was important to have writers of all ethnicities. When interviewed by the Wall Street Journal, Barris denied the show was about race, but he did opt to have a diverse writing staff to be inclusive of different views and experiences of the world (Jurgensen, 2014). The main writers for the show are Barris himself, Samilare Sonoiki, Devanshi Patel, Njeri Brown, and Lisa McQuilan. The writing staff consists of Black Americans, Indian Americans, Jewish Americans, biracial Americans, and "lots of women" (Dalton, 2014).

The producers are equally diverse. Anthony Anderson and Laurence Fishburne who star on the show are executive producers. Also, Helen Sugland and E. Brian Dobbins, who are Black, and Jonathan Groff, who is White, serve as the executive producers of the show, and James Griffiths, who is White, serves as an executive producer and director of the show. Also, there are veteran Black sitcom writers Yvette Lee Bowser and Larry Wilmore.

*Black-ish* premiered on September 24, 2014. The pilot episode pulled in impressively high ratings (11.04 million viewers; 3.3 rating of key demographic 18 to 49-year-olds), and received generally positive reviews. Critics praised *Black-ish* for sophisticatedly tackling the issue of race and ethnicity, and not shying away from the difficult topics about certain subjects that are unique to the Black American cultural experience (McNamara, 2014; Poniewozik, 2014). Tim Surrrette complemented *Black-ish* on being set in a world that "doesn't see color, as told through the eyes of someone that does see color" (Surrrette, 2014).

Many early reviews of *Black-ish* likened it to *The Cosby Show*, but Kenya Barris explains that wasn't the intention. In an interview with *Huffington Post* in 2014, Barris laid out his intentions for the show. He stated that he wanted to "build off of what Dr. Cosby did in a really positive way." Barris denied that the show's creators are trying to define what Blackness is, but rather through the main character, Andre 'Dre' Johnson, the show explores how the homogenization of Black culture in society influences Dre's children's definition of Black as a reflection of their place in society (Williams, 2014). Dre is constantly trying to get his family to understand their own privilege as an affluent Black family, and the spoils that go along with that (de Moraes, 2014).

There was also criticism of the show. Critics felt that it would not resonate with the ABC audience. The show's title came under fire, as some felt it was exclusionary of a mass White audience. However, Barris brushed aside the criticism, and explained that *Black-ish* is more of an adjective describing Black culture than a definition of being Black thereby making it more inclusive (Dalton, 2014). Other critics felt that the show wasn't fulfilling its own mission. *Variety* columnist Brian Lowry criticized the show for having a provocative idea that was poorly executed, and said that it leans on the "obvious and predictable" sitcom writing (Lowry, 2014). Despite the criticism, *Black-ish* maintained an audience, and was picked up for a second season in the winter of 2015.

I have chosen *Black-ish* as the focal point of this study because I am a Black female researcher concerned about the lack of diversity and cultural representation of Black people in television. I feel that it is important to make sure that portrayals of Black people do not reinforce stereotypes or diminish Black culture. I have studied the representation of Black people in television and film, and I am hyperaware of the images and stereotypes of Black people in those

mediums. I chose to focus on television because I feel that medium is potent in terms of audience viewership. The average person watches over five hours of television per day (Koblin, 2016). Television can assemble millions of weekly viewers at one time, and thus the images may hold more weight in terms of representation, because audiences have so much contact with television. For some audience members, television may be their only contact with a person of a different ethnicity or culture.

Television plays an important role in shaping attitudes, especially attitudes about minorities. That is why my analysis focuses on the execution of story being told. Per Adorno's theory of the culture industry, television programs are a cultural product, there is an obligation to sell products. To do that, many complex subjects, like race, religion, and politics are made simplified for a mass audience. This is done through the sanitization of those complex subjects. This will be further explained in chapter two. The purpose of this study is to analyze the first season of *Black-ish*, and evaluate to what extent *Black-ish* serves the vision of Barris and Lee within the confines of a cultural product designed to trivialize. The execution of *Black-ish*, and the vision that Paul Lee and Kenya Barris outlined for *Black-ish* being able to may be extremely difficult given the nature of the culture industry.

This analysis of the portrayal of the Johnson family is especially important, because only 24% of *Black-ish* viewers are Black (Pallotta & Stelter, 2015). With that in mind, Barris is almost writing the show to explain Black culture to a majority non-Black audience. This show is, in a way, explaining to a non-Black audience the experiences of a Black family (Garcia, 2015; Williams, 2014). For some non-Black viewers, this may be the only contact that they have with a Black family or Black people in general. The characters represented in the show serve as the introduction of Black people for some non-Black viewers. Studies have shown that television

portrayals of Black Americans can shape perceptions, especially when non-Blacks have limited contact in real life (Armstrong & Neuendorf, 1992; Fujioka, 1999). The portrayals of Black characters and Black culture are important because they could reinforce or break stereotypes. It is critical that there be a well-rounded representation of Black characters. The next chapter is a review of the literature, and the theoretical lens for this research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Kenya Barris' specific vision for *Black-ish* is the show is to challenge stereotypes, and give White America a look inside the lives of an affluent Black family. This goal may be difficult to achieve in a sitcom. Sitcoms are cultural products that follow a specific formula set by culture industry standards. According to Adorno's theory of the culture industry, a cultural product is a good that is produced by the entertainment industry, and used to feed the capitalistic needs of advertisers and corporations (Welty, 1984). *Black-ish* will be analyzed using Adorno's theory of the culture industry. In addition to the culture industry, theories of symbolic annihilation, and stereotypes of Black people in television are important in evaluating how *Black-ish* represents diversity in the show, and how that representation compares to Barris' vision for the show. In addition, the history of Black sitcoms will give context to the space that *Black-ish* occupies.

### **Culture Industry**

It is important to be critical of the goals that are set out when a television program is being produced. This gives insight into execution of the programming. Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) asserted that film, television, and other forms of entertainment were all manipulative tools used to keep the masses dependent on the majority that controls the content. Adorno and Horkheimer theorized the culture industry during the beginning of capitalist societies. The culture industry was created for advertisers to sell their products by placing them within the cultural product, such as a television show. Then the audience would be compelled to purchase what was being advertised. The cultural product must be standardized, or generic, to appeal to a mass audience (Adorno, 1970). Standardization includes oversimplifying complex situations, and social issues like race and politics and making light of them to make them palatable to an

audience, and thus making it easier for advertisers to sell their products (Mills, 2009). The culture industry conflicts directly with Barris' vision for *Black-ish* to tackle complex subject matter.

The entertainment industry, in Adorno's opinion, is a lesser form of art because of its need to mass-produce products. In addition, he felt that it doesn't challenge individual thinking, but rather reinforces hegemonic structure. The culture industry emphasizes the need (or want) for material, tangible products such as clothes and automobiles. The programs produced by the culture industry are stylized, and made glamorous, taking the audience out of their immediate surroundings, and immersing them into the made-up society of the culture industry. This often blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, giving unrealistic expectations of the human experience. There is no space for the audience to think for themselves. They are at the mercy of the material items as designed by advertisers (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972).

Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) also suggest that the culture industry misleads the audience into thinking that the entertainment industry (television shows, movies, radio, etc.) is there to make them feel like their needs are important when, in fact, the culture industry is there to reinforce hegemonic norms and capitalism. Entertainment is used to sell products and idealism. For the culture industry to sell products, certain complex human conditions must be simplified.

Kenya Barris' vision of discussing complicated, and often uncomfortable, subjects, and showing complex racial dynamics in a sitcom are likely to contradict the goals of the culture industry. Race in American society is a topic that requires deep thought, analysis, and debate amongst the audience. Adorno posits that the culture industry is designed to keep the audience in a passive state of mind. This passive state makes the audience easier to control so that the culture

industry can inundate them with materialistic wants to keep the audience from realizing that they are being controlled. It is through this lens of the culture industry that I evaluate how Barris presents Black culture and racial situation. This research examines whether, and to what extent, Barris can tackle subjects of race, stereotypes, and the idiosyncrasies of the Black community and how that relates to their place in a larger White society.

### **Sitcom Formula**

Adorno also contended that the need to mass produce cultural products creates an assembly line for standardized products, such as sitcoms. Sitcoms, short for situation comedy, are meant to entertain by making serious situations seem humorous (Mills, 2004). They feature an ensemble cast that find themselves in peculiar situations meant to mimic real-life. The characters are placed in situations that require solving a problem or dilemma, and from these situations the comedic value of the sitcom arises. There are two kinds of situation that characters are in: work and home. All situations are solved through humorous schemes within the episode. There is no plot that carries over into the next episode.

Sitcoms were first introduced in the 1940s. The first sitcom to air on television was *Pinwright's Progress* (1946-1947) from the U.K. (McGuire, 2016). The first American sitcom to air was *Mary Kay and Johnny* (1947) which followed the life of real-life married couple, Mary Kay and Johnny Stearns (Burditt, 2013; McGuire, 2016).

Over time, sitcoms developed a specific format, which makes them easy to replicate. An article published in *The Atlantic* (2004) outlined the format of the average sitcom. The episode is broken down into five stages: the teaser, the trouble, the muddle, the triumph/failure, and the kicker. The teaser is in the beginning of the sitcom, and introduces the audience to the protagonist, and their personality through a quick-witted joke. Next is the trouble, which



introduces the protagonist to a problem that must be solved or a goal to be achieved, often containing subplots that aren't necessarily pertinent to the main problem or goal. The muddle usually comes in the middle of the episode. Here, the problem comes with a series of obstacles that must be faced for the goal or problem to be solved. The triumph/failure is the falling action of the sitcom in which the protagonist uses a last-ditch effort, after several failures, to solve the problem; it may or may not work. The kicker, at the end of the program, is the aftermath of the solved or unsolved problem, which usually ends in establishing that all is well regardless of the outcome (Charney, 2014). This format simplifies the complexities of the human condition, and makes the world more palatable for mass consumption, as Adorno posits in his theory of the culture industry.

Sitcoms need to entertain and grab the audience's attention to be successful (Lehman, 2006). Situation comedies are written to elicit humorous responses by offering the audience fast-paced, humorous exchanges between characters on the show (Mastro & Tropp, 2004). Along with the traditional nature of a sitcom are the social and cultural issues that reinforce the norms of society. Heteronormativity, traditional family structure, male-female relationship dynamics, and conventional racial hierarchy were all developed and reinforced by the early sitcoms (Dalton, 2005).

The sitcom formula aids in evaluating the format and structure of *Black-ish*, and ties into how the culture industry places boundaries on the content of programs, and what those boundaries mean for the discussion of complex subjects in scripts. Sitcoms are meant to entertain, and may not be the best platform to showcase or highlight race, politics and other subject matter that is not humorous. The structure of sitcoms is meant comfort the audience

about the world, suggesting that all problems can be resolved regardless of the depth or complexity of the problem.

### **Symbolic Annihilation**

The culture industry's need for mass production, trivializes the complexities of the human condition. One way this may happen is through simplifying or ignoring the existence of underrepresented groups of people. This is known as symbolic annihilation. George Gerbner introduced the theory of symbolic annihilation in the 1970s. Then it was expanded on by Gaye Tuchman.

Nearly 40 years ago, Tuchman (1978) extended the definition in her examination of female representation in mass media. Tuchman gives two explanations for why media underrepresent or ignore women: (1) there are socioeconomic motivations for media programming, and (2) women are not key actors in media organizations. Tuchman pointed out that sexism exists in media because of the socioeconomic structure of the media companies. Television and film studios' sole purpose is to keep their investors happy. This caused producers and writers to be cautious not to offend audiences by addressing what could be considered controversial topics such as women's rights issues or radical critique of liberal issues. A male-dominant view was accepted because the majority of executives were male (Tuchman, 1978).

During the 1970s there was a spike in female and minority hiring at television studios to add diversity. Shortly after, there was a slump in female hiring. Also, there were several lawsuits filed alleging that women and minorities were hired for "dead-end" jobs with no chance of upward mobility. This affected the media representation of women, because programming was developed in an environment that didn't nurture female perspectives. Furthermore, women did not have any control over content. Women felt the need to fall in line with the ideas of their male

supervisors for professionalism purposes, and not wanting to offend their coworkers (Kanter, 1977). Since the 1970s, there have been little strides in women leadership. In 2014, 100% of studio heads were males, and 94% White. Television had more female representation with television network and studio heads being 71% male, and 96% White (Hunt & Ramon, 2015). As this study points out, television is still largely dominated by White males, and that translates in to the type of programming that is released.

Not only can symbolic annihilation be traced to the diminished representation of women, but it can also apply to minorities. Black people are underrepresented in Hollywood, and have a difficult time forging their mark on Hollywood because the system is still dominated by White males. Kenya Barris is one of the few Black showrunners, producers, and writers in Hollywood. Black Americans are underrepresented in the entertainment industry in all facets and stages of creating content. In the 2013-2014 season, Black writers made up 5.4% of all television writers (Sun, 2015). Since then, that number decreased to 4.8% (Marine, 2017). Black writers only make up a small percentage of writers on major television programs, it can be difficult for the White writers to pick up on certain issues because there are no Black voices or opinions in the writing process. The lack of representation can result in offensive tropes and racial stereotypes (Anielski, 2015).

Stephen Duncan (2011) interviewed Black television writers, and many admitted that they find it hard to bring up racial issues in a writer's room where they are outnumbered by White people. It's an uncomfortable subject, so they ignore it all together. Rather than dealing with difficult situations, writers will often simply symbolically annihilate Black experiences, opting instead for all-White sitcoms. Senior writers stated that the way to talk about race is to not

talk about race, out of fear that the audience will be turned off if the show becomes too “preachy” (Williams & Emami, 2014).

Black writers state that they have had various “run-ins” with racial insensitivity during their times as writers for non-black television shows. When some White writers write patently offensive jokes or try to imitate Black American dialect, one Black female writer stated how uncomfortable it was to correct them, because she was in a room filled with White, and majority male writers. They began to coin her a “downer” for expressing her concern or correcting what she felt were misconceptions about the Black community in America (Harris, 2015).

Symbolic annihilation is an important part of this research because it adds a deeper understanding of the boundaries of the culture industry, particularly as it relates to the presence of the complex racial dynamics of Hollywood, and what that means aesthetically and content-wise for *Black-ish*. The lack of Black representation creates a unique challenge for Kenya Barris. In *Black-ish*, he wants to create a world that is cognizant of race, but that could prove to be difficult with the lack of Black writers in Hollywood to offer their own experiences and insight into the daily lives of Black people. Not all the writers on *Black-ish* are Black, as discussed in chapter 2. The dynamics in an integrated writers room will be accounted in the execution of the episodes.

### **Stereotypes**

Without greater representation of Black people in Hollywood, the traditional stereotypes of Black people continue to permeate the content of the entertainment industry. Scholars have found that the representation of Black people in media is often distorted (Entman, 1990; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002; Mastro & Tropp, 2009). Many writers of television and film rely on the common stereotypical representations of Black people to create their characters as a

fail-safe for inclusion. There are historical stereotypes of Black people as well as newly formed stereotypes of Black people that developed within the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gray notes that these stereotypes are necessary for the White majority in power, and they help maintain a racial hierarchy of superiority among Whites and inferiority among Blacks (Gray, 1995).

Beginning in the 1800s, Black Americans were commonly lampooned during the vaudevillian, minstrelsy shows. White male actors would cover their faces in dark coal, make up their faces to have exaggerated facial features like big lips and buggy eyes, and act out what they perceived to be Black American life (Bogle, 2001). The characters that developed would morph into stereotypes with their own personality traits that were perceived as truths, and would be replicated, in some form, in future television shows and films. These characters were: mammies, sambos, bucks, coons, mullattos, and jezebels. The mammy is an asexual, heavy-set woman whose sole purpose is to serve her White family. An example of this is Hattie McDaniel's characters in early film and television (Bogle, 1995). Sambo is one of the most enduring stereotypes in history. A sambo is usually an African American male that is lazy, lacks intelligence, and, because of this, is always dependent upon his masters or caretakers. The prime actor that embodied that role was Stepin Fetchit (born Lincoln Perry) who starred in several films and is regarded as one of the most controversial actors in history (Boskin, 1986). Bucks, or labeled by some historians as savages, are hypersexual males. He is strong, having an ape-like posture, and is used for breeding. The buck usually preys, sexually, on White women and is stopped by White men. This stereotype was most prevalent in D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) in which Blacks are in control and destroying the United States. Then, the Ku Klux Klan steps in to save America from Black control (Boskin, 1986; Plous & Williams, 1995). Coons are the male version of mammies, a subservient, loyal Black male who serves his master (Bogle,

1995). The most recent example of this stereotype is the character of Stephen (played by Samuel L. Jackson) in Quentin Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained*. The mullato, or sometimes referred to as the tragic mullato, is usually a half-Black and half-White biracial woman, who struggles to fit in the two worlds. She usually must choose between passing for White (an example is Sarah Jane in the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*, remade in 1959) or accepting her Black American lineage (much like the character of Pinky in the 1949 film of the same name). Lastly, the jezebel is a promiscuous, sexually insatiable woman who is usually the sexual partner of a White male. This character was used to justify White men sleeping with Black women (Goings, 1994; Jewell, 1993).

The stereotyping of Black Americans is not just a phenomenon of the past, but has carried into the present, particularly stereotypes of Black women, the most notable being the sapphire and the welfare queen. The sapphire was popularized during the *Amos n' Andy* show as a woman of similar physical makeup as the mammy, but one who is fiercely independent, loud, and boisterous. She usually engaged in verbal battles with her significant other. An example of this is the character of Esther in *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977). The sapphire also emasculates Black men (Boskin, 1986; Jewell, 1993). The welfare queen was popularized during the Reagan administration, though it can be traced back to the Blaxploitation film era. As political debates arose surrounding the crack epidemic and the public welfare system, Black women became the face of welfare recipients, represented in the media as a woman with many children, who depends on welfare to take care of them. She doesn't have a job, and usually doesn't do a great job of raising her children (Gilliam, 1999).

A more recent stereotype to be popularized is the magic negro. The magic negro is a Black male or female, who plays the role of a spiritual guide in a White protagonist's life.

Usually in the form of an angel or mystical figure, the magic negro serves to enlighten the White protagonist and fix their life. There are three main purposes for the magic negro: (1) to assist the character, (2) to help him or her discover and use their spirituality, and (3) to offer wisdom in a character dilemma (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Examples of this are Coffey in *The Green Mile* (1999), or Cash in *The Family Man* (2000).

Kenya Barris stated that he wanted to challenge the perception of Black people, and give diversity to television. Diversity should mean more than programming with Black faces. Rather, it should challenge and reverse the stereotypes, as a way of reshaping the mindsets of viewers. Stereotypes of Black people have permeated television for decades. If *Black-ish* seeks to challenge the perception of Black people, but reinforces stereotypes, then Barris' contradicts his own vision.

### **History of Black Sitcoms**

Despite the lack of Black representation in Hollywood, there have been shows that attempt to capture the Black experience, many produced by White males. Though they follow the traditional sitcom format, their approach to situations are specific to Black culture. Means-Coleman (2003) defines Black sitcoms as those that star Black Americans, and works to "illuminate Black cultural, artistic, political and economic experiences." Included in this definition are nuanced subjects that uniquely speak to the Black experience in America. An example would be the use of certain slang, or colloquialisms only heard amongst the Black community. Black sitcoms aim at giving a glimpse of the Black experience, as seen through the eyes of Black people, and are generally marketed and targeted towards Black audiences (Dalton & Linder, 2005). There has been a total of 111 Black sitcoms aired on broadcast television. Over

half of those programs only lasted for one season (Williams & Emami, 2014). Means-Coleman & McIlwain (2005) break these Black sitcoms into five eras.

**The Minstrelsy Era.** This era brought the original Blackface minstrelsy to television, making caricatures of Black people and their experiences. The first Black sitcom was *Amos n' Andy* (1951-1953). It was the television version of a radio program (1928-1960) set in Harlem. The original radio cast consisted of two white males playing the principle characters: Freeman Gosden as Amos, and Charles Correll as Andy. Once the show was adapted for television, there were Black actors cast as both Amos and Andy, Alvin Childress and Spencer Williams, respectively. Then there was *Beulah* (1950-1952) was originally a radio program (1945-1954) starring a white male, Marlin Hurt who portrayed the main character. In the television adaptation, Hattie McDaniel and Ethel Waters, two well-known Black actresses and singers of the day, played the two main characters. There was controversy surrounding the television adaptation, as many in the Black community felt that the sitcom played up historical stereotypes of Black Americans. After much protest by viewers and groups like the NAACP, *Amos n' Andy* and *Beulah* were cancelled (Gray, 1995).

**The Assimilationist Era.** In the late 1960s, there was an attempt to create more positive portrayals of Black people. During this era, Black people could be seen mimicking, or assimilating to the lifestyle of their White counterparts. This made Black people seem more likeable and relatable to White audiences (Dates & Barlow, 1990; Gray, 1995; MacDonald, 1992; Nelson, 1992; and Riggs, 1991). Shows like *Julia* (1968) starring Diahann Carroll, told the story of a nurse raising her son after the death of her husband (Fife, 1974). The show was a departure from the mammy stereotype, and delved in to the life of a Black matriarch (Sewell, 2013). *Julia* was praised for its positive portrayal of Black women, but there was also backlash



because she was a single mother. Some critics felt that the show erased Black males, and Black male influence from their homes (Dreher, 2008). Another criticism of the show was that it did not address any Black culture or civil rights issues (Sewell, 2013).

**Social Relevancy and Ridiculed Black Subjectivity.** The middle-class Black family on television, like in *Julia* portrayed, was short-lived. In the 1970s, sitcoms portrayed Black families as struggling and mostly working class. This was also the era that showed Black people being the subject, as opposed to the object of programs, thereby positively contributing to society (Means-Coleman & McIlwain, 2005). Popular sitcoms like *Good Times* (1974-1979), *What's Happening* (1976-1979), and *Sanford & Son* (1972-1977) all portrayed the nuclear Black family, but all were either poor or working poor, otherwise known as underemployed (Gray, 1995). One of the sitcoms that challenged this image was *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), in which a Black couple, George and Louise Jefferson, move into an upscale East Manhattan high-rise with the success of George's many cleaners. *The Jeffersons* is also the longest running Black sitcom with 11 seasons on CBS (Cadet, 2012).

**The Black Family and Diversity.** This era mostly focused on family dynamics. This is also known as the *Cosby* era (Means-Coleman & McIlwain, 2005). *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) is credited with the most famous portrayal of an upper-class Black family. *Cosby* showed the day-to-day lives of two parents with careers, a doctor and a lawyer, who have five children, living in Brooklyn Heights, NY. The criticism of *Cosby* is that there was very little emphasis or mentioning of the fact that they were an affluent Black family. Also, there were some who felt that two parents, with careers, raising five children, as shown on the show, was unrealistic. For example, Claire, being an attorney, and Heathcliff, being an obstetrician, were home quite often despite having two very demanding and time-consuming careers. The spinoff of *Cosby* was *A*

*Different World* (1987-1993), which followed the Huxtables second oldest daughter, Denise, as she attends a historically Black college, Hillman College (Gray, 1995; Graves, 1993).

**The Neo Minstrelsy Era.** During this era, many Black sitcoms relied heavily on stereotypes, harkening back to the original Minstrelsy era of television. Shows like *Martin* (1992-1997) and *The Wayans Brothers* (1995-1999) saw Black people harkening back to the buffoonery of *Amos n' Andy* (Means-Coleman, 2003). Some of the portrayals caused such outrage that the NAACP vehemently opposed them.

Means Coleman and McIlwain (2005) credits FOX, The WB, and UPN as the “biggest culprits” of the Neo Minstrelsy era (p.125). Networks like FOX, a startup network at the time, capitalized on the Black viewing market with their famous lineup of Black sitcoms, most notably *Living Single* (1993-1998), *Roc* (1991-1994), and *Martin*, and tailored to Black audiences. FOX gained a significant Black viewership. They used this success to gain access to opportunities that gave the network a broader audience. When FOX gained a contract for sports programming, it quickly changed its programming strategy to tailor to White male audiences. In the mid 1990s, FOX began to slowly cancel its Black programming. By 1999, all its Black sitcoms and dramas were gone (Zook, 1999). During much of the late 1990s, a majority of Black sitcoms, like *Moesha* (1996-2001), *All of Us* (2003-2007), and *One On One* (2001-2006) aired on UPN. UPN was an upstart network, and needed programming much like FOX had in the early 90s. When The CW bought UPN in 2005, it only picked up a handful of Black sitcoms for primetime airing *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005-2009) and *The Game* (2006-2015), which was picked up by BET in 2009, were the most popular. By 2009 The CW had gotten rid of all the Black programming and most of its sitcoms all together because the network decided to focus more on dramas (Mathis, 2014). After *The Game* ended on the CW, Black sitcoms were completely erased from

broadcast television, though there were some Black sitcoms that aired on cable television. There were no Black sitcoms on broadcast television between 2009 and 2013.

Black sitcoms opened the door to a televised Black experience, but it was at the expense of the legitimacy and seriousness of experiences and social problems that Black people encounter. Black people are more likely to be featured in a sitcom than a drama (Hunt & Ramos, 2015). Relegating the plight of Black people and their life experiences to a genre of programming that is designed to make everything humorous may signal to the audience that the setbacks and systematic problems that Black people go through is humorous. Making systematic oppression and racism humorous takes away from the seriousness of the situation. Also, as previously stated, many of the representations of Black characters have been negative, and confine Black people to long held stereotypes (Inniss & Feagin, 2002; Staples & Jones, 1985).

*Black-ish* reintroduces Black sitcoms to broadcast television. The history of Black sitcoms gives context to the images, plots, and characters in *Black-ish*. Part of this analysis is evaluating how *Black-ish* fits into the conversation of diversity, and what that means in relation to the Black sitcoms that came before. Barris' ideas for *Black-ish* are not new, and neither is a sitcom about an affluent Black family. What is new is the era in which *Black-ish* is taking place. The world, its moral compass, and its politics have changed since the inception of Black sitcoms, in some regards. This research seeks to analyze whether *Black-ish* evolves the Black sitcom and Black portrayals, and ushers in a new era of the Black sitcom.

### **For this research**

Black sitcoms traditionally show the world from the Black American perspective. That perspective is usually non-humorous situations that are made humorous through traditional sitcom vices. The nature of the culture industry is to make the world simple. This research

analyzes the how *Black-ish* represents diversity, and the goals of Kenya Barris. It also analyzes how the complex experience of Black America is exemplified in a cultural product specifically designed to make the world a simple, humorous place.

The research question for this analysis is:

RQ: To what extent does *Black-ish* address the complex subject matter of Black culture and representation within the structural challenges of sitcom formula?

### Chapter Three: Methodology

*Black-ish* is a part of a diversity initiative by ABC. That initiative includes telling cultural stories that reflect specific racial experiences in America. This research will analyze if *Black-ish* focuses on cultural stories, and how the cultural stories are executed. The execution of the cultural story is important because, as in accordance with Adorno's theory of the culture industry, cultural products like sitcoms are not designed to address specific cultural or complex subjects, and they simplify the complexities of human experiences and interaction. Sitcoms thrive on levity and an over-heightened sense of humor, can make it difficult to properly execute the intricacies and nuances of the complex human condition. These complexities include issues of race and racially charged subjects. Given this fact, it could be a difficult task to display a complicated subject such as being a modern Black family amongst a predominately White environment. Especially, when television has been criticized for excluding or diminishing the experiences and presence of people of color, especially Black people.

This first season of *Black-ish* will be analyzed using textual analysis. The script, the characters, and the plots are the focal point of analysis. The justification for using textual analysis for this research is that it will best help me interpret how, and to what extent does *Black-ish* address Black culture. I chose the first season because that is the foundation for character and plot development for the series. The subsequent seasons follow the model of the first season in that respect.

This textual analysis included reading the text for presence of stereotypes in the characters and symbolic annihilation of the Black experience and Black culture. The history of Black sitcoms (discussed in the literature review) provides a basis for evaluating cultural plotlines in the episodes. As Means Coleman (2003) stated, Black sitcoms are different than

regular sitcoms because they present the specific experience of the Black community by using language and situations that reflect Black culture. Using that definition, this research analyzed how *Black-ish* uses language and experiences to show Black culture. This includes colloquialisms and scenarios that are specific to the Black experience. Those episodes that were found to have a cultural plotline were separated, and given a deeper reading to explore how the cultural plotline is executed in the episode. This included the depth of how the cultural subjects are discussed. Episodes that don't have a plotline that centers on the Black experience were labeled as a generic episode where the experience is universal, and not racially-based. The generic episodes were not given a deep reading, but they were considered in the overall analysis of the show as it relates to character analysis and structure of the episodes.

### **Semiotic approach to textual analysis**

I used a semiotic approach to the textual analysis. Textual analysis is the evaluation of texts that can help researchers better understand how people make sense of their society based on the cultural products that they produce at a given time. Textual analysis is used to interpret the way in which messages are conveyed. It uses texts, such as movies, books, and television programs to examine the relationship between text and cultures, and how it shapes an individual's social reality (McKee, 2011; Hall, 1975). While there is no one way a text can be interpreted, textual analysis allows for the researcher to find a meaningful interpretation of the text. The meaningful interpretation, or latent meaning, is important particularly when analyzing a text that can't necessarily be quantified or coded as in content analysis, which usually entails coding, and in some research counting how many times a certain event within a text occurs.

Textual analysis also allows for interpretation of "implicit patterns, assumptions, and omissions" that cannot be readily deciphered from surface reading of the text (Fursich, 2009; p.

241). When performing a textual analysis, the researcher spends a great deal of time with the text, and that allows the researcher to submerge themselves, and create many interpretations. That is one criticism of textual analysis. Greg Philo (2007) criticized textual analysis for not considering the intentions of the producers of content or audience interpretation and reaction of the content. Fursich (2009) argued that textual analysis engages a specific midpoint between encoding and decoding of media content, and that this midpoint is worth engagement. For this research, I cannot speak to the writers' intention or how the audience will or should interpret *Black-ish*. Instead, this research gives an interpretation of the execution of Black culture and the Black experience as it is presented in the first season of *Black-ish*.

Current events are a part of the textual analysis, because it may inform the script and the plot for the episodes. This is important because *Black-ish* deals with the experience of a Black family in a predominately White environment. A Black family's relationship with current events may differ from that of a White family, and since the majority of *Black-ish's* audience is non-Black, how the audience receives the material may be different than how I interpret the text.

The researcher's theoretical lens for analysis informs what the researcher interprets from the text (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Different theoretical lenses can lead to different interpretations of the same text. But the goal of textual analysis is to create meaning, analyze the way cultures communicate through the text. With a specific theoretical lens, the interpretation of the text is intentional and specific.

The culture industry is the theoretical basis for my textual analysis of *Black-ish*. When analyzing the first season, I looked specifically for ways in which the script presented, and may trivialize, the Black American experience. This experience includes racially significant situations, political views, and stereotypes. Symbolic annihilation and stereotypes are coupled

with the culture industry, as their existence in media can be linked to the need for the culture industry to mass produce products, by diminishing the intricacy of human interactions. Also, analyzing the format of the show, because it defines the space and time that the script should make their point in the episode.

In addition to a theoretical lens, there are different approaches to textual analysis. One of those approaches is a semiotic analysis. Semiotics is the study of signs, and how they create meaning (Barthes, 1972). Signs are the building blocks of communication. A sign can be a word, image, or sound that have meaning beyond its surface meaning. In semiotics, there is the signifier and the signified. The image or sound is the signifier, and its meaning is the signified. My study uses semiotics to discern cultural meaning of the plots in *Black-ish*.

I applied a semiotic approach to the textual analysis to analyze how *Black-ish* executes culture through its script. Also, through the characters, how does *Black-ish* represent Black culture and the Black experience. I analyzed how each character functions within the show individually, and how they function in the ensemble with the other characters, also, what the characters represent symbolically in the script. The cast of *Black-ish* is multicultural and may represent different views. Semiotics is also the way I distinguish what I define as a cultural plot, because I am a Black female who understands Black culture, and what falls under that meaning.

## **Data**

For the textual analysis, the first season of *Black-ish* was viewed twice in its entirety. Then the third viewing was for specific episodes that I chose in which the plot was specifically related to or about Black cultural subjects, and those episodes were given a deeper reading. Notes were taken during each viewing of the show to follow the plotline, and any expressions, inflections, or emphasis in the content of the show that couldn't be described through the script.



## Steps in analysis

**First viewing.** The first viewing of the series was to get familiar with the plot, characters, and the format of the show and in what order does that occur throughout the series. In addition, analyzing if the format stays the same throughout the series, or is there a change in format as the season progresses. The format is the most important part of the first viewing. It entailed looking at the settings, the characters in those settings, and how it may inform the characters' actions.

**Second viewing.** The second viewing was to look at any recurring themes and trends throughout the series. This viewing is a deeper analysis into the script. At this point in analysis, the culture industry informed the analysis. That included how subjects are discussed, and how levity plays a role in the way complex subjects, whether cultural or not. The second part of analysis evaluated the plot for cultural plots. As stated earlier in the chapter, the process of choosing cultural subjects begins by discerning whether the subject matter presented is specific to the Black American experience. This includes racist situations, political situations, or instances of systematic oppression. Those episodes that were found to have a cultural basis were separated to have a deeper level of analysis. The episodes that don't have a cultural basis were not analyzed further than this second viewing.

**Third viewing.** The third viewing was specifically for the episodes that I chose based on their plots showcasing Black cultural subjects. During this deeper reading, I analyzed the effect of the culture industry on the subjects discussed to see if there was an impact on how the cultural subjects are discussed. The impact of culture industry includes any instance of symbolic annihilation and any presence of stereotypes. These instances would directly contradict Barris' and Lee's vision of showing diverse, cultural images and experiences. The findings and analysis are discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four: Data and Findings

I'm still going to need my family to be Black, not Black-ish.

Andre 'Dre' Johnson (Barris & Barris, 2014).

After watching the first season of *Black-ish*, a total of 24 episodes, several reoccurring themes emerged, and they will be discussed in this chapter. The first section of the data and findings are an introduction to the main and supporting characters. The second section is the typology of the cultural episodes and the analysis of those episodes. The third section is the analysis of the structure of the episodes.

### **Characters**

*Black-ish* is an ensemble cast consisting of the Johnson family, and Dre and Bow's coworkers. The characters offer different perspectives to the conflicts that arise in the episodes. Their personalities are different, and each character moves the conversations surrounding the plot. Below is an introduction to the characters. The main characters appear in all the episodes, and whom the plot surrounds (Welsh, 2013). Supporting characters are routinely brought back to the series, and are important to the plot of the series, but do not appear in every episode like a main character (Sierra, 2014).

### **Main Characters**

- Andre 'Dre' Johnson, 40 (he turned 40 during the first season), is the patriarch of the Johnson family. He's from Compton, CA, and an advertising executive. He has managed to create a successful life for his family through his own success but he feels that his success has created a privileged family that is oblivious to how other non-affluent Black families live. This is usually the source of the tension throughout the episode.

- Rainbow 'Bow' Johnson, 40, is Dre's biracial wife. She is a doctor, but also makes time to be a mother and wife. She is usually the voice of reason for Dre, and is more loving and understanding towards their children.
- Zoey Johnson, 15, is the eldest daughter, and the most loved by Dre. She's into fashion, and runs her own teen fashion and beauty vlog.
- Andre 'Junior' Johnson Jr. is the oldest son (his turns 13 in the pilot episode), and the most ostracized by the family. He's intelligent, but often goofy and aloof. He is teased by his family for his love of nerdy activities such as video games.
- Jack Johnson is one of the six-year old twins. He is precocious, and loved by his family.
- Diane Johnson is the other twin. She is witty, highly intelligent, and often antagonizes the rest of the family with quick one-liners.

### **Supporting Characters**

- 'Pops' Johnson, approximately early 60s, is Dre's father. He may or may not live in the house with the family; it depends on the episode. He often gives advice to his family. Also, he criticizes Dre for his success, and his family's lack of Blackness.
- Ruby, approximately early 60s, is Dre's mother. She's very loving towards Dre. She also has an antagonist relationship with Dre's father, who is her ex-husband. She isn't fond of Bow, and often criticizes her for her biracial heritage.
- Charlie Telphy is Dre's newest coworker. Charlie is new to the area, and quickly tries to attach himself to Dre. Outside of the Johnson family, Charlie is the only other Black character on the show.

- Josh is another one of Dre's coworkers. He seems to be younger than Dre, but holds a higher position in the company. He is White, and often borderline offensive with his comments.
- Mr. Stevens is Dre's boss. He is middle-aged and White, and makes his position known throughout the series. He is also equally as offensive with his comments as Josh.

### **Typology of Episodes**

Despite Barris' claim to want to address issues related to the Black experience and Black culture, not all of *Black-ish's* episodes did so. Through analysis of the first season, a typology emerged for how and what extent each episode addressed racial issues. Episodes of *Black-ish* fall into two broad categories: generic sitcom plots or cultural plots. Within the cultural category, there are two subcategories: passive aggressive and intersectional. Generic episodes are those that have a plot that is not related to Black culture or the Black experience. The generic episodes will not be discussed in these findings. Half of the 24 episodes in the first season were categorized as generic, and the other half are cultural episodes.

Cultural episodes have plots that surround conversations specific to Black culture and the Black experience. Often these episodes center on some public debate, in which there seem to be a racial divide about the merits of the subject being discussed. I categorized the specific episodes based on my education in Black American studies and Black representations in media. While 12 episodes address race issues, only six episodes from the first season can be categorized as purely cultural. Through deeper analysis of each episode, two subcategories of cultural episodes emerged: passive aggressive and intersectional episodes. Passive aggressive episodes featured the Black experience as the main plot, but after the tension was introduced, the plot changed into a generic plot and the cultural basis for the episode was dismissed. Two of the cultural episodes

fit this definition. Intersectional episodes had a generic plot, but the conversations between the characters, and the way the tension was resolved is specific to the Black experience. Four episodes were intersectional.

The next sections offer in-depth analysis of the cultural episodes, and justification for their categorization. They are divided into the categories previously discussed: first the cultural episodes, then passive aggressive, and intersectional episodes. There are tables that state episode number, the title of the episode, head writer of the episode, the original air date, and a general plot summary.

<u>Episode</u>	<u>Title/Writer</u>	<u>Original Air Date</u>	<u>Plot Summary</u>
1	"Pilot" by Kenya Barris	September 24, 2014	Introduction to the Johnson family. Dre is up for a promotion at work.
3	"The Nod" by Kenya Barris	October 8, 2014	Dre tries to show Junior to importance of Black male acknowledgement.
5	"Crime and Punishment" by Corey Nickerson	October 22, 2014	Dre battles with the decision to spank Jack.
10	"Black Santa/White Santa" by Gail Lerner	December 10, 2014	When the company Santa dies suddenly, Dre jumps at the chance to be the company's first Black Santa.
12	"Martin Luther Skiing Day" by Lindsey Shockley	January 14, 2015	The family goes skiing on MLK day. Dre tries to show Junior the relevancy of racial prejudice when Junior doesn't recognize the significance of MLK day.
20	"Switch Hitting" by Kenya Barris	April 22, 2015	Dre's Blackness is challenged when he tries to win an account for the firm.

**“Pilot.” Original air date: September 24, 2014.** This is the introduction to the Johnson family that consist of Dre, his wife Bow, and his four children, Zoey, Junior, Jack, and Diane. The episode begins with Dre introducing his family. Then he begins to discuss his life, and that he is an ad executive, who has made a good life for himself and come a long way from Compton, CA, where he grew up. This pilot episode sets the tone for the entire series, especially how Dre views his environment. I identified this episode as a cultural episode because it’s about Dre’s identity as a Black man, and how he is navigating his surroundings.

This episode centers on Dre’s career advancement, and the stigmas that go along with that. He gets a promotion at work, but soon finds that his ethnicity, and not necessarily his work abilities, are the reason for the promotion. Dre explains to the audience that his advancement is an advancement for all Black people. As he is walking through his building, there are other Black people there with less prestigious jobs, or jobs that don’t have a ladder of upward mobility. Dre has “made it,” but he is an anomaly. The fact that he still feels that he must break barriers is a symbol that while Black people have made strides within corporate America, there is still work to be done for true equality, particularly in the workplace. This is what Adorno talks about when he speaks of the culture industry selling the viewers an ideal, as farfetched as that ideal may be. *Black-ish* equates the American Dream with a corporate identity, and that encompasses all the tangible items that Dre accumulates.

Early in the episode, Dre gets the promotion he’s hoped for. Though Dre is promoted, signifying his upward movement, his promotion is a double-edged sword. Dre is promoted to the Vice President of the “Urban Division,” which in his mind is “the Black stuff” (Barris & Barris, 2014). Dre feels that his advancement isn’t valid, because he was chosen based on his skin color, and not necessarily his abilities. This is representative of the struggle that Black people face

when trying to elevate their status. Black people want their abilities to be respected in the workplace, and by their White coworkers.

The other side to the coin is that while Dre wants to advance regardless of his race, his position within the show is about his race informing, or validating, his advancement. This makes for an interesting, and somewhat confusing, dynamic in the show. As Bow states in the episode, Dre would've been upset if the position was given to a non-Black person, yet he's upset that he was chosen to lead the "Urban Division" (Barris & Barris, 2014). This may be representative of the battle that Dre feels within himself, which is explored throughout the season.

Pops, Dre's father, is introduced in this scene. Pops scolds Dre for working at a White-owned advertising firm, and states that Dre would've been a partner at this point in his career if he were at a Black-owned firm. During the conversation between Dre, Bow and Pops, the children are introduced. Junior arrives with his White friend, Zach, and informs his parents that he wants to have a Bar mitzvah instead of a 13<sup>th</sup> birthday party, even though the Johnsons aren't Jewish. He also says that he wants to try out for field hockey instead of basketball. Dre is mortified, and worries that his family is forgetting their Black roots. Then, the twins, Jack and Diane, exclaim that they didn't know that they're Black. Dre is forced to reevaluate his success and Blackness when listening to his children disinterest in their Black identity.

Dre decides to hold a family meeting to inform them that they're on "Operation: keep it real" (Barris & Barris, 2014). This is slang for reclaiming their Blackness. This episode clearly addresses what W.E.B. Dubois refers to as double consciousness. According to Dubois, Blacks and Whites live in two separate worlds. Even if they inhabit the same community, they have different experiences of being an American. Double consciousness explains that Black people have two versions of themselves: mainstream self and real self. (DuBois, 1903). The conflict of

these two identities can cause a Black person to lose their identity by trying to fit into two worlds. That's the struggle that Dre is going through. He feels that his success has made his children less aware of how the world views them. At the same time, he is dealing with his own abandonment of his Blackness for his family's elevation. Also, Dre is dealing with his Pops, who constantly grieves him about being a puppet for White people. This, compounded with his promotion issues, is the inciting action for the entire series. Dre projects his struggles with double consciousness onto his family, more specifically, his children.

Dre decides that Junior is going to have a "Rite of Passage" ceremony instead of a birthday party. The "Rite of Passage" is an African tradition in which a male child, at the beginning of puberty (usually around 13 years of age) is given the responsibilities of manhood (Warfield-Coppock, 1992). Bow and Pops disagree with this decision. During this scene, the difference of being Black and being African (either an immigrant or direct descendant) is touched on. Dre tries to connect his Blackness directly to African traditions. The problem with this concept is that Black people in America, who are descendants of slaves, don't always know their cultural lineage in African, unless, they have acquired that knowledge through DNA or an ancestral search. There are different cultures in Africa. Each country, city, and tribe has their own traditions. This lack of ancestral and cultural direction has forced Black people to adapt to their environment, and create their own traditions.

At work, Dre must give a presentation for a potential account. Mr. Stevens' tells Dre to "put his swag on it," and Dre uses the opportunity to showcase a more culturally grounded presentation by presenting a chaotic, political, post-Rodney King verdict riot view of Los Angeles (Barris & Barris, 2014). The culmination of Dre's inner conflict, the promotion, and his children's apathy result in Dre giving a potentially career-ending presentation. The scene is



supposed to be funny and over-the-top, but it also presents an interesting conflict for Dre. He begins to question his own motives for his advancement. He begins to doubt his sacrifices, and feeling like a puppet, much like what Pops calls him. This is a part of double consciousness. The maintenance of two identities can call one's judgement into question.

The resolution of Dre's conflict, in this episode, is given through Pops. Pops tells Dre that he should be true to himself, and not worry about his family's perception of their Blackness versus his perception. Pops giving Dre this resolution seems almost out of character for him. When Pops was introduced in the episode, he seemed to be the least likely to agree with Dre's decision to forgo his Black identity. Dre seems to find peace in his father's advice. The episode ends with a voiceover of Dre redefining the word "urban," and accepting the promotion, because in the end he is providing a better life for his family, and that is the American dream (Barris & Barris, 2014).

While Dre finds comfort in his quest for advancement and acceptance, his conflict still lingers. It is the impetus for the conflicts that arise during the rest of the season. What's problematic is that Dre equates his success with the material things that he has gained, such as his house and his car. As Adorno's concept of the culture industry would predict, by the end of the first episode, the conflict (Dre's s double consciousness) is resolved by consumerism and fulfillment of the American Dream. Dre's advancement is purely self-centered. He loses the sense of community that he had in the beginning of the episode.

**"The Nod." Original air date: October 8, 2014.** This is a cultural episode because it explores a code of acknowledgement between Black males. A nod between two Black men, a semiotic gesture, is rooted in the Black tradition, particularly in Black males as Dre explains in the episode. Another aspect of this episode is what could be described as the levels of Blackness

that some within the Black community feel exist, and rules of communication amongst the Black community. The concept of “the nod” is explained throughout the episode using parallel concepts of male rules of communication

The episode begins with Dre taking his children to school. While Dre helps Junior carry a project, he sees another Black man with his son, and gives him “the nod,” and Junior does not. This upsets Dre, and he explains the meaning behind the gesture in the next scene talking to Bow and Pops:

Dre (talking to Bow): *Look, babe. The nod is important. It's the internationally accepted, yet unspoken, sign of acknowledgement of Black folks around the world. (In a voiceover) So, no matter who you are or where you're at, it's your duty to give the nod. Even in the most extreme circumstances, we always found a way to let each other know, "I see you bruh."* (Barris & Barris, 2014).

“The nod” is a way of saying that there are very few Black people around *us*, and *we* are the ones who made it out of economic disparity and marginalization to live amongst the White community. The White community is the beacon of success, which was explained in the pilot episode.

Bow (talking to Dre): *Dre, please don't turn this into another thing. The truth is that Junior's generation has different perspective on the struggle to you and Pops. Can't you just let that be a good thing* (Barris & Barris, 2014)?

Bow relegates “the nod” to those that have survived the “struggle.” The struggle is defined as the difficult task of pulling yourself up out of poverty and cultural, political, and systematic disenfranchisement. This is done traditionally through attending college, and getting a high paying job that will afford you the opportunity to elevate your social and economic status. It

is a struggle because studies show that is difficult to elevate your socioeconomic status in America. The socioeconomic status that you are born into, is statistically where you will stay for the rest of your life (Hargreaves, 2013; Ratcliffe, 2015). This is because poverty stricken neighborhoods have less opportunity than affluent areas. There is less access to well-funded schools that have resources to prepare one for college; that greatly limits one's opportunity of receiving a college education, and to be hired at a well-paying job.

In Dre's case, he worked himself out of the poverty-stricken Compton, CA, went to college, and was able to land a high-paying job which is why he is successful. The children will not have to work themselves upward in the same way that Dre did. Furthermore, they are being raised in a predominately White neighborhood, and that comes with its own set of acknowledgements and rules, as with any other community. This concept is explained by Bow, but Dre and Pops still think that it is unacceptable for Junior not to know "the nod":

Dre: *Bow, the nod is on the same primal level as a baby waving "hi."*

Pops: *That's right.*

Dre: *As a man scrunching up his face when a woman with a big butt walks by.*

Pops (imitating the scrunching face): *Ah!*

Dre: *Whew!*

Junior: [staring with a blank then perplexed expression]

Dre: *Oh, my God. You don't do that either? I have failed (Barris & Barris, 2014)!*

This is the first point in the episode where the equivalency of male code of communication is equated with Black male rules of communication. Dre and Pops equate the nod with a man finding a woman attractive, and giving a semiotic gesture. Dre talks with Junior, and realizes that Junior isn't around Black kids at his school. Dre thinks that Junior's lack of

exposure to other Black kids is the reason for his lack of acknowledgment. Dre thinks that is the crux of the problem and tries to find Junior some Black kids to hang out with. It is during Dre's search to find Junior Black friends that the different socioeconomic statuses of Black people and the cultural differences amongst Black people, as it relates to income, are introduced. Bow suggests that Dre consider the Leimert Park social club to find friends for Junior. This social club seems to be a replica of Jack and Jill of America, a prominent Black social club organization that provides opportunities volunteering and networking for Black youth (*jackandjillinc.org*, 2016). Members of this social club come from affluent Black families. Parents have sought these social clubs as a way of connecting their children to their roots (Rohrlich, 1998). This is precisely what Dre is trying to do for his children. This episode does a great job of presenting diversity within the Black community, and it serves Kenya Barris' vision of showcasing a variety of Black experiences. There is a significant percentage of the Black community that is working class and lower class. But there is a percentage of Black people that are upper class, like those who participate in programs such as Jack and Jill.

Later in the episode, Dre takes Junior to the Compton recreation center, which was used to parallel the Leimert social club and socioeconomic statuses, to play basketball with other Black youth. In the pilot episode, it is established that Junior is not good at basketball, but Dre insist on taking him to the recreation center to play basketball. The scene is problematic in that it reinforces the stereotype that Black people are constantly associated with sports or athleticism. The parallel between the social club and the recreation center makes it appear as though playing basketball is more Black than joining a prestigious organization that has, and continues to provide other outlets for success for Black youth. Sports also provide the same kind of

opportunity for impoverished Black youth, but it does align with stereotypes even though the outcome is positive.

Charlie Telphy is introduced in this episode. He's a Black man that has been added to Dre's advertising team. He is recently divorced, and is raising his son Eustace. In his introduction, Charlie has similarities in mannerisms to Dre. They connect over their shared views on race. But, as the episode progresses, Charlie's quirks are introduced, and it seems that his character is more for entertainment than to show more diversity in the Black community. Charlie has a lack of personal boundaries, and that makes his character uncomfortable to be around, but a comic relief for the episode. This is shown when Charlie stands next to Dre in the bathroom, and when he tries on Dre's clothes and shoes at his house. Charlie's quiriness irks Dre and Bow. Again, with these scenes, there is a parallel between Black male communication and male communication. During the dinner scene when Charlie wears Dre's shoes, he is breaking both rules, and it comes off as comical.

There are parallels between Dre and Charlie's characters. Both have contentious relationships with their sons for the same reasons. Both don't think that their sons understand "the struggle," because they reaped the benefits of their parents' success. Dre thinks that Junior and Eustace should befriend each other, which further advances Dre's plot of finding Junior some Black friends. Also, Charlie wants to introduce Eustace to more friends, because they just moved to the area.

At the end of the episode, Junior and Eustace are in Junior's room, and they are talking about a game. They bond over their shared love of this game, and things that surround the game. When Dre sees this, he concludes that Junior's "struggle" is different than his. Junior's "struggle" is being a nerd, and not fitting in with the rest of the student population. In this scene,

the parallel of communication is at play. When Junior and Eustace are talking about the game, they are using terms that only avid consumers of the game would know. When Dre hears them talking, he has no clue what they're saying or what they are referencing, as did Junior in the beginning of the episode when discussing "the nod." The plot has come full circle, and Dre realizes that there are different means of communication between groups. I believe that this episode is teaching the non-Black viewing audience the same lesson of communication between Black people.

The evolution of double consciousness is at play during the conclusion. Dre and Charlie have similar backgrounds, and their success has caused their sons to have similar backgrounds and identities. Junior and Eustace don't have the same concept of their Blackness as their fathers do, because they were raised in an environment that doesn't immediately recognize them based on their ethnicity. Instead, they are outcasts because of their interests. Their form of double consciousness may be that they must align themselves with popular interests to be accepted into their environment.

In this episode, the use of cultural parallels explains the Black experience to a non-Black audience. Dre compares being othered as a nerd today to being othered because of one's race. Another parallel can be seen in comparing how Dre explains "the nod" and the bathroom stall rules. Dre explains to the audience that there are certain rules that men follow. One of those rules is that they do not stand next to one another in the bathroom stall. Charlie breaks this rule, and Dre is uncomfortable, much like when Junior doesn't recognize "the nod." Explaining the unwritten male rules is supposed to make the audience understand the unwritten Black male rules of acknowledgment. Paralleling gender rules with cultural rules may not be sufficient to get a non-Black audience to understand Black cultural rules.

**“Crime and Punishment.” Original air date: October 22, 2014.** This episode is cultural because it discusses how Black families discipline children, which usually involves physical discipline. Dre and Bow contemplate spanking Jack when he won’t stop prank hiding. In this is episode, spanking is discussed in a generational way, but I chose to label it as cultural because statistically Black families are more likely to spank their children than any other ethnicity (Patton, 2017). Also, there are direct links between slavery and Black parental discipline, and both are a part of the Black American experience.

This episode about spanking also aired on the heels of the Adrian Peterson incident, in which the NFL star was accused of spanking his child with a switch. A switch is a thin branch from a tree or bush. There were pictures of Peterson’s then four-year-old son with whipping marks on his legs, hands, and scrotum (Cooper, 2014). There was outrage by some parents who claimed that the act was barbaric and abusive. Others, most notably Charles Barkley, claimed that spanking is a form of discipline, particularly for Black families. After that, the debate transformed into Black parenting versus White parenting, and is spanking acceptable, or is it a behavior that is too rooted in old ways that needs to be obsolete.

When Jack won’t stop hiding, Dre threatens him with a spanking. As the episode progresses, Dre struggles on whether he will physically discipline Jack with a spanking. In this episode, the spanking debate is divided amongst generations. Pops believes that spanking is valid, necessary, and will always yield positive results. Dre and Bow are on the fence about it. When Dre gets to work, his coworkers of different ethnicities have their own opinions about spanking. All had their own stories about being spanked as children. This is despite the statistical and sociological data that suggests that spanking is a cultural norm in the Black community. While the subject of spanking can be viewed as a generational form of discipline, there is a

cultural background for spanking in the Black community, and Black parents are more likely to spank their children (Suh, 2015).

Spanking in the Black community can be traced back to slavery. The history of spanking isn't discussed in this episode. It is annihilated completely from any conversation. It is a disservice to relegate spanking to a generational debate, especially given the statistics on Black parents and forms of discipline. Spanking, or whipping, was introduced to the Black community during slavery. The slave master would beat slaves as a form of punishment, as well as physical and psychological control. This behavior was passed down from the master to the slave and their families (Love, 2009). Since spanking wasn't presented as a cultural discussion, there is no background information about its origin in the Black community. It is the only time that a cultural subject isn't discussed in the show. The reason for that is unclear, but it can be inferred by using Adorno's theory of the culture industry, that the subject of slavery and its ramifications are not comfortable nor marketable to audiences.

The back and forth argument about the merits of spanking note how controversial the topic is. There are studies that suggests that spanking causes post-traumatic stress disorder, because it is an act of violence. Also, studies show that spanking is learned behavior that will be passed down, similar to individuals who experience, or are exposed to, domestic violence (Simons & Wurtele, 2010; Vittrup & Holden, 2009). In the episode, that may be the reason that Dre decided not to spank Jack. In a flashback, Dre recalls Pops spanking him with a Hot Wheels' track. The flashback seemed to be traumatic for Dre.

Instead of spanking Jack, he tells him that he is disappointed in him hiding. Jack is more devastated that Dre is disappointed in him, than when he was being threatened with a spanking. Dre realizes that his approval means more to his children than discipline. This is a win for Dre,



because he was able to gain control of Jack without using any physical form of discipline, unlike what Pops used to do to him.

While spanking isn't in and of itself presented as a cultural subject, the conversation can be discussed as a cultural subject. There is a difference in the way that Bow and Dre view spanking, as opposed to how Pops views spanking. That can be traced to generational and cultural. Pops came of age at a time when physical discipline, especially amongst Black families, was a way to keep children in line, and save them from receiving discipline in the world, such as getting in trouble and getting arrested. Which has racial implications, especially for young Black males. Bow and Dre may have different views because they are raising their children in a predominately White environment. Physical violence, as debated with Adrian Peterson, may not be culturally acceptable in the environment that Bow and Dre are a part of.

**“Black Santa/White Santa.” Original air date: December 10, 2014.** In this episode, Dre desperately wants to be Santa at his company's annual Christmas party but his boss, Mr. Stevens chooses Angelica, a Mexican American woman, to play Santa. I identified this episode as cultural because it explores the belief of Santa only being White, and the in-group biases of the Black community. This episode, seemingly, was written after the comments made by Megyn Kelly, in which she firmly stated that Santa Claus is White (Pfeiffer, 2013).

Dre is appalled and upset when Mr. Stevens chooses Angelica, particularly because of her Mexican heritage. Ruby sides with Dre, and says that Black people have earned the right to play Santa before any other ethnicity or sexual orientation. Bow calls out Dre and Ruby for harboring racist views, which they deny. Dre and Ruby fervently believe that Black people can't be racist, because they're Black. Black people have been the targets of racism and racist policies, and it would be against Black people's interests to exhibit racist or prejudiced behavior. Racism

in the sociological sense is one group holding the majority of power over a lower group, and thus being able to create a systematically oppressive environment, making it extremely hard for the oppressed group to gain their own power (Claire & Dennis, 2015). There are some who believe that because Black people are not readily in a position of power economically, politically, or socially, they are not able to be racist in the sociological sense of the term. The flipside to that debate is that when Black people are the majority, and a white person is in the minority in the environment, that Black people can impose their own sense of circumstantial power, even though outside of that environment, they hold not nearly as much power (Freeman, 1995). This is at the heart of the conversation between Dre, Bow, and Ruby.

An undertone of this episode is the seeming animosity between Blacks and Hispanics. Historically, the war between Black and Hispanic gangs, and the changing racial makeup of Black neighborhoods, with the influx of Hispanic immigrants, has caused tension between the two groups. Some of the basis for that animosity is addressed in this episode. Ruby laments about how Hispanics have taken all the low-level jobs away from Black people. There are Black people who feel that the social, economic, and political plight of Black Americans and the Black community are being ignored, especially with the ongoing debate about immigration reform becoming increasingly popular in the media and politics. The want for Black people to have their fair share at success is displayed when Dre devises a plan to get Mr. Stevens to reconsider his decision about choosing Angelica to be Santa. Once Dre hears the way that Angelica says “ho, ho, ho,” by putting emphases on the second “ho,” he immediately goes to Mr. Stevens, and Mr. Stevens decides that Dre will play Santa instead of Angelica (Lerner & Barris, 2014). Mr. Stevens seemingly chose Angelica to be Santa, after Dre insists that he have a person of color be Santa, and in his mind that meant him. Dre is so adamant at solidifying his Blackness at the

company, that he is willing to sabotage another minority group, even though their fates are bound together by them both being minorities in a predominately White firm.

The conversation of Blacks versus Hispanics and Black people confronting their own prejudice are difficult and uncomfortable discussions. That could be the reason that both were infused into the subplot of Ruby and Bow arguing over who will make Christmas dinner. Dre and the kids want Ruby's traditional Christmas dinner, but Bow wants to make a more contemporary Christmas dinner. The big reveal at the end of the episode is that Ruby hasn't made Christmas dinner herself in 10 years. She's been ordering the dinners from a Hispanic-owned caterer. When Bow finds out, Ruby makes a speech about how Hispanic Americans are the backbone of the American work force, seemingly adding irony to her disparaging statements about Hispanics earlier in the episode. I believe this was done to present both sides of the debate about Hispanic immigrants. It is done in a humorous fashion, as Adorno posits it would be, but at the same time, it is one of the only ways to present both sides of an argument without it overtaking the larger plot. Angelica gets her revenge by withholding the fact that Santa is responsible for purchasing presents to give the children at the Christmas party. Consequently, Dre doesn't buy presents, and all the children are disappointed.

The resolution in the episode is that Dre realizes that Christmas isn't a competition, it's about family and comradery. There is a double entendre about the resolution of the shows that Blacks and Hispanics rely on one another to survive, as they are both struggling to cement their place in America, and fortify their heritage and importance to the larger society. Ultimately, the two minority groups need one another to succeed, and make a powerful majority. Undermining each other only serves to divide, and neither group will advance. This lesson isn't learned by Dre, and that is a lost opportunity. Dre's learning experience is more self-centered, and focuses

on Christmas. He fails to realize that his plight ties in with Angelica's because they are both minorities. Sabotaging her doesn't change his position within the company or his identity amongst his coworkers. But instead, Dre chose his position as a male identity over his ethnicity when convincing Mr. Stevens to choose him over Angelica.

It is interesting to note that while this episode centers on a discussion of Santa's race, very little attention is given to the facts that Mr. Stevens chose a woman for the role. When Dre first tells Bow that he is disappointed she says she's happy a woman was chosen. This episode normalizes the thought that Santa doesn't have to have a specific gender, as Dre is more upset about the ethnicity than the gender. Traditionally, sitcoms uphold heteronormative gender roles, but this episode strays away from that.

**“Martin Luther Skiing Day.” Original air date: January 14, 2015.** This episode is cultural because it pays homage to the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement, and the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. However, this episode's potential impact is diminished by the light-heartedness of the writing, and the unfair comparisons of the struggle of those in the Civil Rights Movement to the struggles of contemporary teens on vacation. There are several moments of levity to prevent the episode from being more like a sermon than a sitcom. The first moment is during the introduction with Dre's voiceover.

*Dre: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., visionary leader, commanding orator, and disciple of nonviolence. No matter what they threw at him, he always managed to keep his temper in line, and, arguably equally important, his mustache [a picture of Dr. King is displayed with arrows pointing to his mustache]. I mean this thing is always on point (Shockley & Barris, 2015).*

Dre begins by talking about the legacy of Dr. King, and the struggles that he endured during the Civil Rights Movement. The sequence has pictures of Dr. King, and spiritual music in the background. It appears this will be an episode to teach the audience, about the struggle for Black equality. As Dre is talking about the legacy of Dr. King, he makes a joke that Dr. King was also known for having a great moustache. That is comedic relief of the sermon-like tone that Dre was using at the beginning. That is the beginning of a trend in this episode to make the subject matter more palatable for the audience.

Every year for Martin Luther King Day, the Johnson family takes a ski trip to commemorate his life and work. Dre claims that the family is breaking down the “color barriers on the slopes.” The irony of that statement is that on average it cost \$5000 per person to ski. There are both Black and White families that can’t afford to ski. This is an example of *Black-ish* making excuses for the Johnson’s lavish lifestyle as Dre asserting their Blackness into historically White circumstances.

This episode presents MLK Day as a holiday *for* Black people. At work, Mr. Stevens talks about MLK being a holiday for Dre and Charlie, and he uses air quotes when he says “holiday.” The same tone and air quotes are used by a police officer that stops Dre later in this episode. The air quotes and the sarcastic tone indicate that some White people may hold hostility about MLK Day, seemingly because it’s not a day that benefits them personally. Junior’s friend Zach who accompanies the family on the ski trip, offers a different representation of White people’s attitudes toward MLK Day. Zach talks about how his family usually teaches literacy at the local prison on MLK Day. In this simple statement, the episode evokes stereotypes of Black lack of education and criminality and White savior trope. Dre makes a joke that White people must be productive on MLK day, and that Black people don’t need to have the same kind of

productivity, because of their Blackness, and knowing about the struggle. Dre's comment about the lack of productivity and Blackness reinforce the stereotype about the laziness of Black people. The stereotype suggests that Black people would get ahead if they would work for it, which completely ignores the systematic racism that limits Black people from obtaining equal education, and thus can limit their opportunities for social, political, and economic advancement.

Though Dre doesn't see the need to engage in community activism on MLK Day, he is appalled when Junior can't state any facts about the March on Washington. What's more embarrassing for Dre is that Zach knows more than Junior. Later, Dre and Bow discuss Junior, and conclude that they've raised a "bad Black person," who is unaware of his heritage and history. Dre uses the rest of the episode to show Junior that racism still exist. Although strides were made with the Civil Rights Movement, there is still more work to be done to achieve full equality.

When Dre, Junior, Zach, and Charlie (Dre invited him earlier in the episode) are driving to the ski lodge, they are stopped by a police officer. Dre feels that this is perfect time to teach Junior about racial profiling. He asks Zach to film the police stop in case something detrimental occurs. The police officer, however, uses calm tone, and explains he stopped Dre for a legitimate reason. Dre is hypersensitive, taking every word out of context. Everyone in the car agrees there was nothing wrong with the officer's actions. In this scene, Charlie is driving, and Dre is on the passenger side:

*Charlie: Alright, everybody. This is it. Wallet in hands. No sudden movements.*

*Dre: Zach, record this. If anything happens, tell our story.*

*Zach (takes Dre's cell phone): On it.*

Police Officer (knocks on window. Charlie rolls the window down): *License and registration.*

Dre: *Yeah, because he doesn't think we have it.*

Police Officer: *No, just a routine question.*

Charlie (chuckles nervously): *He's a diabetic [talking about Dre], um...I'm gonna give him some Now & Laters to get his sugar back.*

Dre (talking directly to the officer): *Sure, like you ask everybody for their license and registration.*

Charlie (angrily): *Stop playing, Dre.*

Police Officer: *Asking for license and registration, we learn that on day one.*

Dre: *Oh, and what did you learn on day two? How to pull over a car full of law-abiding citizens?*

Charlie (to Dre): *I'm not going back. I swear to God I'm gonna hit my nitrous.*

Dre: *No, no, we weren't speeding, we weren't swerving, we weren't...*

Police Officer: *Your tags are expired, but I'm gonna let you guys go with a warning because it's a [makes air quotes] "holiday weekend."*

[The officer walks back to his patrol car]

Dre: *You see that? Air quotes* (Shockley & Barris, 2015).

This scene is troubling as it makes light of, and pokes fun at, racial profiling. Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Oscar Grant, and Michael Gardner are some of the most recent high-profile, police-involved killings that this scene is mimicking. These victims, all Black Americans and unarmed, were allegedly, profiled, apprehended, and/or killed by police officers. There were no convictions or indictments for any of the killings. The scene in *Black-ish* suggests that Black

people overreact when being stopped by police, even though there is evidence that Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be racially profiled, and arrested for petty crimes than Whites.

Dre continues his lesson when he, Charlie, Junior, and Zach go into a convenience store, aptly named Whitey's. Dre uses this opportunity to show Junior about racial profiling in stores. When they walk into the store, the cashier/store attendant isn't fazed or paying attention to any of them. Dre decides to provoke a response from the clerk by stealing candy. Unbeknownst to Dre, the candy is free, and his plan falls through. They end up getting kicked out of the store because Charlie was sampling the nacho cheese without paying for the nachos. While this scene is funny and light, it again makes light of racial profiling. It adds fuel to the belief that Black people overreact to the simplest things, and play the race card when there is no reason or action that requires such a response.

Next, all the family, including Charlie and Zach, arrive at the ski lodge. When Dre and his family don't get the adjoining room that they requested, Dre immediately claims that the establishment is racist. The irony is that another Black family is books the adjoining rooms. Dre makes a scene, and stages a sit-in on the luggage cart. Then he gets detained by security. In the next scene, he is sitting at a table, behind bars, which turn out to be decorative posts in the corner of the resort, and he is writing a letter about the state of racism, harkening back to Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail":

Dre (speaking out loud to himself): *Freedom, like adjoining rooms, is never given, it must be demanded by the oppressed...* (Shockley & Barris, 2015).

Again, it's hard to claim that the Johnsons are oppressed when they can afford to take seven people skiing, and two separate rooms at a swanky ski resort. This trivializes actual systematic oppression that minorities are subjected to. Bow comes over to talk to Dre, and reprimands him



for making a scene. Then she mocks Dr. King for being called a “doctor,” when he didn’t have a medical degree. Both Bow’s comments and Dre’s comedic reenactment of King’s imprisonment trivialize the significance of the Civil Rights Movement and King’s contribution to history.

The final scene is Dre, Charlie, Junior, and Zach taking the shuttle to the top of the mountain. Dre and Charlie plan to ski, while Junior and Zach plan to snowboard. When they get on the bus, Junior and Zach are treated differently because they are snowboarders, which is less respected than skiing. They are immediately told to sit in the back of the shuttle instead of where they want. This prompts Junior to make his version of the “I Have a Dream” speech, in which he states that all people, whether snowboarding or skiing, should be treated equally.

Junior: *Excuse me. Can I say something?*

Dre (voice over): *And then it happened. When confronted with actual injustice, even if it was small scale, in the spirit of Dr. King, Junior knew how to step up.*

Junior: *I may be a newbie to snowboarding but the way you’re treating her, it’s not right. There’s no difference between boarders and skiers. We’re all just people with wood strapped to our feet sliding down a mountain. I have a dream that one day we will not be judged by the size of our board but by what we do in the pow-pow. Because the snow doesn’t care who we are...*

Charlie: *It does not. The snow plays for keeps.*

Dre: *Oh, okay.*

Junior: *It just wants to be thrashed. Free to thrash. Free to thrash. Thank God, all mighty, we’re free to thrash.*

[Applause]

Dre: *Hey, that’s my son everybody! My son, a standup dude* (Shockley & Barris, 2015).

The passengers on the bus applaud, and Dre exudes pride in his son's speech. When Junior sits down, he explains to Dre that he understands that there is still racism in the world, and is aware of the dangers that lurk for him, as a young Black man.

The conclusion to this episode is problematic, because it diminishes the struggle of civil rights and equality to being as simple as just integration. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and other subsequent movements for equality like Women's Rights, and LGBTQ rights, was about more than a minority or oppressed group being given the permission to assimilate and integrate into a dominant culture. It is about dismantling the systematic structure that was put in place to oppress minority groups, and to have those who benefit from that systematic structure recognize that they benefit from it.

**“Switch Hitting.” Original air date: April 22, 2015.** This episode, which aired well into the first season, is at the core of *Black-ish*'s mission. This episode is cultural because it explores double consciousness, and mainstream concepts of Blackness and Black culture. In this episode, the internal battle that Dre faces, riding the line between Blackness and respectability within/assimilation into White culture is verbalized. The episode begins with Dre, in the mirror, dressed in a throwback jersey, with a thick gold chain, and a pit bull in tow. He explains his attire and double consciousness in the voiceover:

Dre (voiceover): *It's been said that Black people have a double consciousness. We have our mainstream selves to be in "the man's" world, and we have our down-home selves for the brothers. Some of us handle the switch effortlessly. Some of us have trouble. I was always one of those who handled it perfectly, but no more switching back and forth for me. From now on I'm keepin' it real, one hundred...Damn it. I mean, a hunnit. You may be wondering how I got to this very real place. Well, if you believe every Hollywood*

*movie ever made, the same way any Black guy gets anywhere...With the help of a White guy* (Barris & Barris, 2015).

The monologue sets up the battle that Dre has fought the entire season, even after this episode. Double consciousness is a survival tactic. Systematic racism forced Black people to create two versions of themselves to survive to thrive in a White dominated world. Black people must prove that they're just as intelligent, educated, and focused as their White counterparts. In other words, Black people have been forced into assimilating to White culture, because to be from a different culture, or their own Black culture, is a hindrance to achieving success, or as Dre pointed out in the pilot episode, the American Dream.

Mr. Stevens informs Dre that Jay is looking for a great advertising plan to advance his business, and he heard that Dre was one of the best ad men. The undertone is that Jay is looking for the best way to advertise to Black people. Jay is a White man imitating his version of Blackness. He is speaking in stereotypical Black diction. He uses terms like "keep it real," and defines Blackness in the way that White America has been conditioned to define Blackness. Images that are controlled by mainstream America have painted a one-dimensional picture of Blackness. As Jay observes Dre in his work environment, he is turned off by Dre's love of the farmer's market, and how he is "acting White" over the phone. When Dre gave a presentation that detailed his plan for Boxable, Jay immediately dismisses him as "corny," or an "Oreo," meaning that he's Black outside, and White inside. Instead, Jay gravitates toward Charlie, and is considered giving the account to him. Charlie is more authentically Black to Jay, which is code for stereotypically Black.

The name of Jay's company, Boxable, may be read as a metaphor for Jay trying to put Blackness in a box to sell, and not realizing that Blackness comes in many shapes or forms. Jay

has an issue with Dre not conforming to the stereotypical notion of Blackness, as he himself does. The irony of this episode is that Dre is receiving the same treatment that he gives his family throughout the series. From the pilot episode, Dre went to great lengths to point out that his family lacks Blackness. He is constantly teasing or disapproving their choices, because he feels that they do not align with his definition of Blackness. Now, he is being challenged on his Blackness, ironically by someone who is White. Just as he goes to great lengths to teach his family about their Blackness, he must now prove that he is Black, in the cultural sense.

To impress Jay, Dre invites him over for dinner. The goal of this dinner is to show Jay how “Black” he and his family are. Unfortunately, there are many things that undermine Dre’s attempt at impressing Jay. At home, Dre goes downstairs to find that Bow straightened her normally curly natural hair. When Jay arrives, the twins come downstairs after working on school projects about the person they admire. Jack is dressed up as Vanilla Ice, whom he dubs the “godfather of rap,” and Diane is dressed as Sarah Palin. Then Junior enters, dressed in a Dungeons & Dragons costume, and Zoey asks Dre if she and her friends can attend a John Mayer concert. To add fuel, Bow serves “healthy” soul food: vegan mac n’ cheese, and kale as “collard greens.” Then Pops comes in the door, and mistakes Jay for an IRS official (Pops receives a letter from the IRS in the b-plot), and tries to bribe him. Jay seems perplexed, but it’s not clear if he is aware of Dre’s efforts.

After the dinner, Dre is noticeably defeated. Pops talks to Dre, and Dre tells him that he failed to impress Jay, and he’s going to lose the Boxable account to Charlie. Pops tells Dre that he shouldn’t be ashamed of his ability to straddle both the Black and White worlds. His ability to play both fields allowed him to create a great life for himself and his family; it’s necessary for survival. This was an interesting moment, and surprising coming from Pops. From the pilot, Pops

always gave Dre a hard time for not being Black enough, and being a “puppet” for the White man. The internal struggle that Dre is posed with in this episode, directly ties to double consciousness. Dre questions whether his hard work is worth his reputation as a Black man.

The next day, Charlie gives a presentation to Jay, and it is horrible. He gave terrible suggestions for Boxable, and the lust that Jay felt toward him in the beginning of the episode wore off with the presentation. Dre arrives, and gives a speech to Jay about Blackness.

*Dre: All week, I've been listening to the White Cornell West over there make me feel like I wasn't Black enough for this campaign. You know what? Screw you... Keeping it real isn't some checklist you find on Yo! MTV Raps. It's about being you, and for me, sometimes that means watching The Good Wife with the missus while we eat mac and teese, all right? It's got my cholesterol down. I'm off the Lipitor, Son. And, that's real*  
(Barris & Barris, 2015).

Essentially, he tells Jay that his stereotypical image of Blackness was not his form of Blackness. Jay is impressed by Dre's confidence, and tells him that it is this Dre that he wanted to see in the first place. He gives Dre the account.

The resolution of this episode is problematic, as it is predicated upon Charlie's failure. Dre received the account because Charlie proved that he wasn't as astute or creative or intelligent as Dre. The message of the episode is marred, because it is unclear whether Dre would've gotten the account if Charlie didn't mishandle the presentation. But, this is also aligned with Charlie's character. His intelligence is always juxtaposed to Dre's, and because he is the protagonist, Dre is going to be favored by the audience. Whether Dre's speech is what convinces Jay is debatable because of Charlie. That deflates the entire episode.

The next section is the passive-aggressive episodes that begin with a cultural plot, but shift into a generic plot after the introduction.

<u>Episode</u>	<u>Title/Writer</u>	<u>Original Air Date</u>	<u>Plot Summary</u>
9	"Colored Commentary" by Yvette Lee Bowser	December 3, 2014	Bow is upset when Dre doesn't stand up for her during Jack's baseball game.
14	"Andre from Marseille" by David Hemingson	February 18, 2015	Dre is upset when Zoey begins dating a White exchange student from France.

**“Colored Commentary.” Original air date: December 3, 2014.** This is the first of the passive aggressive cultural episodes. Both the title and the beginning of the episode suggest that it will address race. Race is simply the catalyst for an episode that centers on husband/wife dynamics. This made for a confusing plotline.

At the beginning of this episode, Dre explains to the audience that it is hard keeping his family together. He forces the entire family to attend Jack’s baseball game to bring his family together. During the game, the announcer uses what Bow considers derogatory and racist language when referring to Jack. Bow asks Dre to confront the announcer, but he doesn’t find the comments offensive. Bow is angry that no one, including Dre, finds the comments offensive, and she makes a scene in front of the other parents, who are White. At this point, the plot changes into being about marital issues and not about coded language. As the episode continues, Bow is angry at Dre, but he doesn’t understand why. Later, Dre and Bow attend a work function and Bow confuses two artists. Instead of correcting her, Dre lets the mistake go in the conversation.

He corrects Bow later after they leave the party. Bow becomes more upset with Dre for not coming to her aid.

The use of coded language is only brought up again in the middle of the episode when Dre tries to make up to Bow for not backing her up before. Dre yells at the announcer in front of everyone and accuses him of racism. Only this time, the announcer isn't using any coded language. The problem with this episode is that, though Bow's angst about the announcer is valid, the coded language is never explained and Dre's challenge to the announcer, for comedic purposes, happens when the announcer has done nothing wrong. This completely invalidates the significance of the coded language used at the introduction by the same announcer. As a result, this episode misses the opportunity to address coded language and micro-aggressions that are a part of the Black experience. Since it is never discussed in any form, and there is a change in the direction of the plot, non-Black viewers may not pick up on the nuanced language, and both what was said in the introduction and what was said in the middle of the episode may not resonate or hold significance. This is another form of the symbolic annihilation of the Black experience. This opportunity made light of coded language and micro-aggressions.

Coded language, often used in media, is words that subtly but intentionally play upon implicit racial biases. For example, during Hurricane Katrina media outlets referred to Black residents as "refugees" and "looters" while White residents were referred to as "victims." Bloggers called out media outlets for dehumanizing and criminalizing Black residents, and playing on implicit racial biases (Jones, 2005). Racial micro-aggressions are implicit racial biases that come about because of subconscious psychological conditioning, and adversely effects certain minority groups such as Black Americans (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). Much like racially coded language, this episode misleads the audience to believe that

there is nothing wrong with coded language. This episode misses the opportunity to teach the non-Black audience about subtle, intentional, and unintentional behaviors and language that can, and often do, exacerbate and excuse racial biases and stereotypes. Much like coded language and micro-aggressions, this episode conditions the non-Black audience to think that nothing is wrong with certain phrases or words. Adorno posits that this will happen, and he also posits that there will be lighthearted subject matter, which there is.

**“Andre from Marseille” Original air date: February 18, 2015.** This episode, like “Colored Commentary,” had a complete redirection of the plot. The plot changes from being about interracial relationships to being about an overprotective father plot. In the beginning of the episode, Dre tells the audience that he and Zoey are close, but feels that they are growing apart. He tries to coerce her to talk to him while he drops her off at school. Then she informs him that she has been “hanging out” with a boy named Andre, and now they’re dating. Dre seems pleased in the beginning, until he finds out that Andre is White, and an exchange student from France. Afterwards, Dre tells his coworkers about Zoey’s new boyfriend. Josh and Mr. Stevens are thrilled. Charlie is indifferent, saying that the children of Zoey’s generation don’t look at race the way him and Dre’s generation looks at race. This is the first episode that Charlie is subdued in nature. He is calm, and not making wild suggestions or acting erratically.

As the conversation continues, Josh applauds Zoey for dating Andre. Dre interjects, and asks Josh if he feels that Andre dating Zoey is a victory for White men. Josh quickly changes the subject. This exchange has a deeper meaning than is shown. It touches on the victory White men experience in being able to have their way with Black women, otherwise known as the bed wench. Black women have been the targets of White men’s sexual exploits, and objectification, since slavery, and is reinforced in the stereotype of the Jezebel. This history was lost during this



conversation, because the attention was given to something else. As with “The Dozens,” there was a missed opportunity to delve into stereotypes and perceived notions about Black/White American relationships that stem from slavery, and the residue that exist in American society from slavery.

The subject matter of the episode changes during a conversation at Dre’s job when Josh and Charlie warn Dre about Zoey dating someone who is French. Both emphatically tell Dre that the French are known for being the creators of romance, and that Andre may eventually coerce Zoey into having sex with him. This causes alarm for Dre. At this point, Dre is not concerned with Andre being White, and it appears the whole conversation that arose from Andre being White is pushed aside to illuminate that he may try to have sex with Zoey.

When Dre tries to talk Zoey out of dating Andre, Zoey breaks the news that Andre broke up with her. Dre immediately assumes, it’s because she’s Black. In a way, the plot of the show comes full circle in this moment. The beginning of the episode is about race, then the plot becomes generic, but goes back to race. But the transition back to race is quelled when Junior informs Dre that Andre broke up with Zoey because he thinks that she is shallow. The interracial dating conversation is further removed when it is revealed that Andre dumps Zoey for another Black girl at school. That makes it clear that Andre didn’t dump Zoey because of her race. Dre is more furious about Zoey being labeled shallow. The fluidity in Dre’s anger is something that is present in many episodes, and it is even pointed out by Bow in the pilot episode. Dre is upset about race, but when the conflict isn’t the direct result of race, he then gets upset at that.

Charlie points out that Zoey is shallow because Dre is shallow. He explains to Dre that they are shallow because they work in the shallow industry of advertising, where everything is showmanship and selling. Dre concedes this fact, and so does Zoey. Dre tells Zoey the reason

that Andre broke up with her, and she is relieved that it's not because she was "ugly" (Hemingson & Barris, 2015). This further proves why Andre broke up with her.

An interesting subplot of this episode is Dre enlisting the help of Junior to find out why Andre broke up with Zoey. This is the first episode that Dre seeks the help of Junior, and it appears that they begin to bond over Junior's knowledge of computers and social media, which he uses to spy on Andre. This bond is short-lived when Junior fails to inform Dre about the demise of Andre and Zoey's relationship.

This episode is shallow, much like how Zoey and Dre are described. Its attempt at delving into interracial relationships, only to skim the surface, doesn't align with the vision that Kenya Barris laid out when the show was conceptualized. This also plays right into Adorno's explication of the shallowness of the culture industry.

<u>Episode</u>	<u>Title/Writer</u>	<u>Original Air Date</u>	<u>Plot Summary</u>
15	"The Dozens" by Peter Saji	February 25, 2015	Dre teaches Junior "the dozens," when he is being bullied at school.
22	"Please Don't Ask, Please Don't Tell" by Peter Saji	May 6, 2015	Dre's sister Rhonda visits for Mother's Day. He feels that his sister isn't being upfront about her sexuality.
23	"Elephant in the Room" by Courtney Lilly	May 13, 2015	Dre is mortified when Junior wants to join the Young Republicans group at school.
24	"Pops' Pops' Pops'" by Vijal Patel	May 20, 2015	Pops tells the kids a story about their great great-grandfather, when the twins must complete a school project about their family history.

The remaining four episodes to be discussed are categorized as intersectional.

Intersectional episodes take on subjects that are relevant to Black and non-Black audiences but address them through the lens of a Black family. In its first season *Black-ish* takes on high school bullying, LGBTQ issues, political affiliation, and family history. While none of these topics are specific to the Black experience, how the series addresses them is.

**“The Dozens.” Original air date: February 25, 2015.** The first intersectional episode aired midway into *Black-ish*’s first season. In this episode, Junior is being bullied. The plot of dealing with a bully is generic, but how Dre advises Junior to confront the bully is specific to the Black experience in America. Dre teaches Junior “the dozens,” a Black tradition of trading comedic insults about one another. “The dozens” is a tradition that began during slavery, and was used to build psychological strength to cope with abuse from the slave master and larger society. While traditionally “the dozens” can be viewed as a form of psychological bullying, which some studies show has a detrimental effect on the victim, it was a Black male’s only weapon against bullying from Whites, particularly White males, during slavery (Bruhn & Murray, 1985)

In this episode, through an animation sequence Dre explains “the dozens” to the Josh and Mr. Stevens and the audience:

Dre (voiceover): *Long ago, opposing African tribes didn’t actually fight. They’d just make fun of each other.*

Animation African tribe man 1: [clicking tongue] *Yo mama.*

Dre (voiceover): *Later, those same dudes came across the ocean, on something like the Love Boat, only no love, all Isaacs. Pissed off Isaacs. Eventually, they arrived in America, and the less desirable slaves were sold by the dozen. But they found a way to*

*turn their pain into something positive, by making fun of each other. That's what we call "playing the dozens" (Saji & Barris, 2015).*

During the sequence, there is a place holder that says "Slavery animation too much of bummer. - Producers." The producers apparently felt that because *Black-ish* is a comedic family show, animating slavery wouldn't be viewed as funny. Both the partially true history and the animation placeholder are examples of the simplification that Adorno predicted; serious, visceral subjects, like slavery and African history don't have a place in the culture industry. The goal of a sitcom is to make you laugh, and slavery isn't laughable. This deception of the origin of "the dozens" is more problematic as it diminishes and rewrites the turmoil and psychological trauma inflicted upon slaves.

Junior informs Dre that he is being bullied by Cody, a White student from Boston. Dre immediately says that Boston is the home of the "original scary White guy" (Saji & Barris, 2015). Then Dre tells his coworkers the same thing. There is a subtle message communicated with that identification. Black males are often viewed as the aggressors, and not the victim. This is further addressed at the end of the episode. Having Junior in a position of victim to a White bully gives a different aspect to young Black males. Also, in a sense, it plays on the racial history of the White male aggressors in the Black experience, like slave masters and police officers. Dre decides to teach Junior "the dozens" to combat the bully verbally, instead of physically. At work, Dre and Charlie decide that "the dozens" is the most effective way to deal with Junior's bully:

*Charlie: There's two ways to handle a bully, all right? One, beatdown. Which, seeing that he's from Boston, is not an option.*

*Dre (shaking his head): Mmm-mmm.*

*Charlie: Two, talk about him till he cries.*

Dre: *Exactly. I'm gonna teach my son how to play the dozens. Yes.*

Mr. Stevens: *I'm sorry. I'm sorry. The dozens?*

Dre: *Yeah, you see, we come from a long proud African Tradition of talking trash (Saji & Barris, 2015).*

They don't understand the concept. In fact, the issue of bullying in this episode is juxtaposed with their privilege, when they explain that they had bullies when they were younger. They tell Dre and Charlie that they were bullied by other minorities at their school. Josh and Mr. Stevens further exemplify White male aggressors. They were the ones bullying the minority students:

Josh: *Ugh! I had a bully. I'd grab his tiny head and flush it down the toilet. [laughs] Then he'd crawl around the bathroom floor looking for his glasses.*

Mr. Stevens: *[laughs] That's classic. My bully was a Latvian exchange student. I'd give him a potato-chip wedgie. I'd just dump a whole tube of Pringles down his pants. That chip makes a nice jagged shard.*

Dre: *Hold up. Hold up. Hold up. It sounds like you two were the bullies.*

Mr. Stevens: *No, no, no. They bullied us by being different.*

Josh: *Yeah, like how the Native Americans bullied my ancestors.*

Dre: *What the.... (Saji & Barris, 2015).*

This scene was a short, comedic exchange, but it can represent certain racial attitudes toward minorities. This seems addresses how many White Americans feel they are now oppressed minorities. Whites may feel that because of certain policies, like affirmative action and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that they're being punished for being White, even though prior to those laws and policies, minorities were (and still are) discriminated against based on ethnicity.

Later at home, Dre teaches Junior "the dozens."

Dre: (sighs) *The point is bullies used to mess with me until I got in that ass with some word-fu. Never got in another fight.*

Junior: *But I don't know how to be funny.*

Dre: *Son, being different is the fuel for funny. And looking at you, you got a full tank.*

Junior: *I guess the lesson started. It's like when Obi-Wan taught Luke Skywalker to...*

Dre: *Son, do you like being bullied? Now, look, you got to study your bully. Find his flaws, and go in. All right, now, there's several ways to do it, but my favorite is stating the obvious. [pointing at Junior] Look at this brother wearing a striped shirt.*

Junior: *What's wrong with my shirt?*

Dre: *Nothing! But my tone convinces you that everything is. Another version, the false compliment. Man, nice jeans.*

Junior: *Oh, yeah?*

Dre: *Your mama know they missing?*

Junior: *They don't fit her anymore.*

Dre: [sighs] *All right, if you ever get stuck, you can go to my favorite. "You big."*

Junior: *"You big"?*

Dre: *You big Crest 3D toothbrush-faced ass fool. See, got you. Your turn. Go.*

Junior: *You big...*

Dre: *Uh-uh. I don't believe it.*

Junior: *Sesame Street...*

Dre: *Not funny.*

Junior: *Looking like a...*

Dre: *Mmm-hmm.*

Junior: *Like a ... Like a...Like a nice...*

Dre: *Say it. Say it!*

Junior: *Comb* (Saji & Barris, 2015)?

Junior implements his new lesson on the bullies at school. Cody isn't one of the bullies because he's been suspended. Junior keeps insulting people to the point that Dre and Bow are called into the principal's office to discuss Junior's behavior. The principal accuses Junior of being aggressive with his words. Dre tells the principal that the only reason Junior is behaving this way is because he was being bullied, and the school has not reprimanded anyone. In this scene, the principal labeling Junior as "aggressive" is why Dre taught Junior to fight back with words. While it isn't verbally spoken in this episode, it can be inferred that Dre knows that Black males, whether the aggressor or the victim, will be blamed, as it is shown in this episode. Also, this episode comments on the school system's failure to reprimand White bullies, as Dre points out.

At home, Junior starts insulting his family, and that's when Dre realizes that he didn't teach Junior decorum. His insults are personal and hurtful. Junior has become a bully. Dre informs Junior that he should only use "the dozens" as means of defending himself from someone who is actively bullying him. The irony of this scene is that Junior is often the victim of bullying from his family. Junior is reciprocating the treatment that he receives. Yet, in this episode, he is made out to be overusing his new skill set of "the dozens," even though his family overuses him as a verbal, and sometimes physical, punching bag.

In the conclusion of this episode, Cody is back in school, and Junior decides to use "the dozens." Junior plans to disclose very personal and painful information about Cody's home life, and his parents. Then he remembers what Dre taught him about decorum, and not becoming the bully. Instead of talking about Cody, Junior decides to turn the jokes on himself. That displeases

the students, who are gathered to watch the verbal sparring, and Cody punches Junior in the face. At home, Dre tells Junior that he is proud of him, but Junior continues with the insults. This is the first episode that shows Junior standing up to Dre, and his insults. Also, the crux of this episode shows the power of words. While “the dozens” may not be a peaceful solution to bullying, it gives Junior the power to stand up for himself. “The dozens” gave Junior the power just like it gave slaves power and resilience against their enslavement. Contrary to what experts believe, Black males need a mechanism like “the dozens” to build mental endurance from verbal and mental abuse that they receive from the outside world, such as racial profiling (Dailey, 1986). This episode shows that there are verbal tools that can be used to combat bullying instead of physical that result in an unfair punishment for young Black males like Junior.

**“Please Don’t Ask, Please Don’t Tell.” Original air date: May 6, 2015.** This episode discusses the family views on the LGBTQ community. I categorized this as an intersectional episode because, this episode deals with a universal topic of how families view their LGBTQ family members as seen through a Black family. In this episode, there is a generational difference about how the Johnson’s handle their thoughts, opinions, and feelings of their LGBTQ family member.

The setting of this episode is Mother’s Day. The family gathers to celebrate Ruby and Bow. This episode introduces Dre’s sister Rhonda, played by Raven Symone. Dre speaks about Rhonda in the introduction.

Dre (voiceover): *There’s some things Black people don’t like to talk about. Like, if OJ really did it. The proper amount of suit buttons. And we never talk about... how much we love Robin Thicke. Another thing a lot of Black people don’t like to talk about is the gay people in their family. Take my baby sister Rhonda. She’s gay. I think. She lives in a one-*



*bedroom apartment with her friend Sharon, who's a mechanic, and their cat, Kitty Lang. So, yeah, she's definitely gay. And I'm cool with that. Of course, she never told me directly, because we don't talk about it. And my mom, she really doesn't talk about it* (Saji & Barris, 2015).

The setup for this episode is problematic insofar as Dre's monologue defines Rhonda as gay based upon stereotypes of the LGBTQ community. The monologue seems to be a light-hearted approach to explaining how the Black community chooses to ignore certain topics that evoke polarizing reactions.

Dre also explains that Black people usually ignore their LGBTQ family members, but he didn't give an explanation. A great deal of homophobia in the Black community stems from religious beliefs that were instilled during slavery, and the belief that marriage and relationships are to be strictly heterosexual (Sekou, 2017; *Human Rights Campaign*, 2017).

When Rhonda and Sharon arrive, it appears that Ruby is completely oblivious to Rhonda and Sharon as a couple. She refers to Sharon as Rhonda's friend. It is revealed later that Rhonda and Sharon are engaged, and plan to marry soon, but they didn't invite Dre and Bow because Rhonda hasn't officially "come out" to Ruby. Bow implores Dre to talk to Rhonda about how to handle Ruby.

At work, Dre talks to Charlie and Curtis about his sister, and the point is drilled in that Black people don't talk about, or ignore, LGBTQ members of their family. Curtis is Black, but he only appears in two episodes during this season.

Curtis: *'Sup, boss? You look bothered.*

Dre: *No, man, just some family stuff. Bow doesn't think I'm close enough to my sister, who's gay.*

Charlie: *Whoa. Been there. I got a brother. He's not gay or nothin'. But we got our issues.*

Dre: *Mmm-hmm.*

Charlie: *Yet, and still, I was the best man at he and his lifelong roommate Gustavo's health insurance consolidation party last summer on Fire Island.*

Curtis: *That sounds like a gay wedding.*

Charlie: *Whoa, watch your mouth there, youngster. That's my not-gay brother you're talking about there.*

Curtis: *It seems that if he wasn't gay, you wouldn't have to keep telling us how not gay he is.*

Charlie: *Don't you got, like, some coffee or something you need to be going to get. This kid here, right [laughs].*

Curtis: *All right, it's been great visiting the 1950s (Saji & Barris, 2015).*

This exchange between Dre and his Black coworkers emphasize the point made by Dre in his monologue about Black people not talking about their gay family members. The tone of the conversation, particularly Charlie's tone, is sarcastic as the point is being made about Black families and their ways of dealing with the LGBTQ community. There is another conversation between Dre and his White coworkers, and one of them is a lesbian, and she tells Dre to try to talk to his sister, and offer support. Dre decides to have a conversation with Rhonda while they made a sandwich, but they don't talk about Rhonda's sexuality, or her engagement:

Dre: *So, you good.*

Rhonda: *Yeah, I'm good. [clears throat] You know, just doing me.*

Dre: *Okay.*

Rhonda: *You good.*

Dre: *Yeah, you know, robbing Peter to pay Paul.*

Rhonda: *You know, one monkey don't stop no show.*

Dre: *Ha! You ain't gotta tell me that. And if I had your hand, I'd cut mine off.*

Rhonda: *Shoot, I'm just trying to make a dollar out of 15 cents.*

Dre: *Well, I'm waiting on my rich uncle to come out of the poorhouse.*

Rhonda: *Good luck with that. Stay up.*

Dre: *That's all I can do (Saji & Barris, 2015).*

Bow listens in on the conversation, and is in disbelief that they didn't talk about anything. The conversation proved that maybe Dre wasn't as comfortable or open to Rhonda's sexuality as he thought he was, because there is no way that Dre thought his conversation with Rhonda had depth. After this conversation, and the exchange between his coworker, Dre decided to have the conversation again with Rhonda. This time he confronted her about being engaged:

Dre: *So how you doing?*

Rhonda: *You know. I'm happy to be blinkin' and breathin'.*

Dre: *Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. No, but I'm serious. How are you doing? Planning a wedding?*

Rhonda: *Wow. I can't believe Bow told you.*

Dre: *Ha! Of course she did. Hell, she thought we were gonna talk about it earlier, but we made that sandwich.*

Rhonda: *That sandwich was bomb and we should have another one. Come on.*

Dre: *Hey, hey. Rhonda, Rhonda, Rhonda. Come on.*

Rhonda: *Yeah, yeah, Um, I'm sorry I didn't invite you. You know it's just that ...*

Dre: *Hey, you don't owe me an explanation. This is on me. Look, I know I wasn't as supportive as I should have been about you going through your lesbian-ification.*

Rhonda: *No, Dre, no no, no. See, you can't just become lesbian-ified. You gotta be born lesbian-ic.*

Dre: *See? Thank you. Now I know the right words.*

Rhonda: *You're welcome.*

Dre: *You know, I'm happy you found somebody. You know, you and Sharon are great together.*

Rhonda: *Wow. I really appreciate that (Saji & Barris, 2015).*

During this exchange, Dre eludes to Rhonda's sexuality being a choice, and she corrects him, and says that it wasn't her choice, and she was born that way. This exchange is important in the debate about homosexuality being a personal choice, while heterosexuality is the natural/birthright choice. Both Ruby and Dre believe that Rhonda's sexuality is a choice. But there is no scientific proof that one chooses, personally, whom they are attracted to.

During the Mother's Day dinner, as the family made a toast, Dre decides to announce Rhonda and Sharon's engagement. He feels that he was doing the right thing. Ruby is devastated. Rhonda gets angry at Dre. Dre talks to Ruby, and Ruby laments that it's her fault that Rhonda is gay, because she let her play with a gay neighbor. Dre corrects her, and said that this wasn't a choice, and Rhonda is who she is. Ruby talks with Rhonda, and everything is resolved. Rhonda invites Ruby to the wedding.

The conclusion of this episode is a prime example of the superficial nature of sitcoms. All sitcoms have a happy ending, though in real life, there are parents who refuse to accept their

children because of their sexuality. Ruby is so set in her beliefs, but then her love for her daughter conquers all.

**“Elephant in the Room.” Original air date: May 13, 2015.** This episode is about family politics and conflicting views amongst different generations. This is an intersectional episode because it discusses the Black community, and its long-standing political affiliation with the Democratic Party. Again, Dre is inflicting his beliefs on his children, but has no plausible explanation for his Democratic affiliation, other than his ethnicity. This episode also explores the melding of two identities that, according to Dre, cannot exist in the same space: being Black and being a Republican. But for Junior, there is room enough for both identities, because his Black identity isn’t rooted in overcoming racist circumstances like Dre.

The episode begins with Dre telling the viewing audience that Black people are not Republicans. He states, “that’s something we just don’t do” (Lilly & Barris, 2015). Black people are Democrats, and it’s a longstanding tradition in the Black community. While it is true that in the US most Black voters register as Democrats, this episode doesn’t explain the political history of Black people in America, including the political history of Black people would require explaining voting rights, and the history of both the Democratic and Republican parties as they relate to Black people (*Pew Research Center*, 2016). That may be too intricate and complicated of a history to tell in the limited time of a sitcom.

After the introduction, Junior informs Dre that he wants to join the Young Republicans group at school, and Dre is mortified. In the subsequent scenes he taunts Junior, and makes jabs at conservative beliefs. Dre tells Bow and Ruby about Junior’s decision, and they are equally mortified. Despite Ruby subscribes to many conservative political views, such as views on marriage equality, she disagrees with being labeled a Republican. This represents the views of

many Black people, especially the elder Black community (Kidd, Diggs, Farooq, & Murray, 2007; Gay, 2013). Many Black Americans hold conservative views, yet still align themselves with the Democratic Party, and that can be linked to the history of the parties, which wasn't or couldn't be explained in this episode. The irony is that the Democratic Party is the party of Jim Crow, and other laws and policies that disproportionately had a negative impact on Black America, and it was the Republican Party that ended slavery, though both parties have a history of racist views. The political views of both parties have changed in the last 50 years, and the ideologies of the parties are not what they were when the parties were first conceptualized. (Escott, 2014).

At work, Dre told his coworkers about Junior's decision. Mr. Stevens and Josh were happy about Junior joining the Young Republicans, said that Junior is the type of young man that the party needs as a future leader.

*Dre: You just don't get it. There are just some things a Black person cannot do. You can live in the suburbs and be cool. You can listen to the Dave Matthews Band and still be down.*

*Charlie: I love the Dave Matthews Band.*

*Dre: A Black guy can marry someone White and still be cool... You can do anything but you can't be a Republican. They are not down for us, so we are not down for them (Lilly & Barris, 2015).*

This explanation fails to acknowledge that the Republican Party, in the earlier stages, was the champions of slavery abolition (Foreman, 2012). This is where a little historical information would be helpful for the audience. Charlie warns Dre that he has to talk Junior out of joining the Young Republicans because he doesn't want Junior to be labeled an "Uncle Tom," which Mr. Stevens takes to be a positive label:

Mr. Stevens: *Why not? I love my Uncle Tom. Okay, he wasn't actually my uncle but he was a great Black guy named Jim who worked for my dad and did everything he was told even at the expense of his own community.* [pause] *Uncle Tom isn't a great thing, is it?*

Dre and Charlie [shaking their heads]: *hmmm-uh* (Lilly & Barris, 2015).

It is an interesting choice on the writers to have Mr. Stevens, a White male, explain the concept of an “Uncle Tom,” instead of having Dre explain it in a fantasy sequence or voiceover. It may have lessened the impact of the term, because Mr. Stevens says a lot of outrageous things that are satirical in nature, and if a viewer has never heard the term “Uncle Tom,” they might realize it is a common racial caricature, and the impact that the figure has in the Black community. “Uncle Tom” is visually explained in a fantasy sequence later in the episode when Dre fantasizes about Junior being a guest on the Bill Maher Show, and his placard reads “Uncle Tom.” This gives the audience an idea of what an Uncle Tom is, even if an audience member isn’t familiar with the term. Though political figures like Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell would’ve been ideal examples to give the audience, because both have been criticized by the Black community for being Republicans.

Dre decides to dissuade Junior from his decision by giving him literature of liberalism, though liberalism doesn’t necessarily equate to the Democratic Party. When Junior informs Dre that he joined the Young Republicans because of Hillary Montgomery, a Black classmate, who is a member of the group, Dre is relieved that Junior is smitten with a girl, but Bow and Dre still try to speak to Junior about his decision to join the Young Republicans.

Bow and Dre discuss Junior’s decision to join the Young Republicans, and Junior challenges his parents by asking them if they even knew why they were Democrats. Dre gave the short answer, “because we’re Black,” while Bow told Junior that she agreed politically with the

Democratic Party. This exchange was interesting. This was second time during the season that Junior challenged his parents. It seems like the writers wanted Junior to forge an identity that was out of his character's norm. Junior's character was the perfect fit for this storyline, because it added more depth to his personality, and he seems to be the character that is most assimilated, but has a certain autonomy to make personal decisions.

After Junior brings Hillary home to meet his parents, she invites Dre and Bow to her home to meet her parents, Marcus and Angela Montgomery. Upon introduction, The Montgomery family is as affluent as the Johnsons, maybe even more so based on their elaborate, gated home, and their White butler/chef. Marcus and Angela appear to be very welcoming to the Johnsons, but Dre and Bow have visible tension. The Montgomery's explain their choice to identify with the Republican Party. Then Angela makes a backhanded insult at Bow by claiming that she took time away from her career to raise a family. Bow takes offense and the parents get into a heated argument, and Junior is embarrassed at his parents' behavior.

At home, Junior informs his parents that he did not want to subscribe to their political beliefs. Interestingly, Ruby agrees and told Dre and Bow that they cannot force their beliefs on Junior. He must make his own decisions. This is a change for Ruby since she was equally appalled with Dre and Bow about Junior's decision to join the Young Republicans. In the end, Junior decided not to join the Young Republicans. Zoey reveals that she introduced Junior to one of her liberal friends, and that dissuades him from joining the Young Republicans. Zoey agrees with Dre, and says "Republican? Black folks just don't do that" (Lilly & Barris, 2015). Even though the subject matter of this episode is important, it is diminished by Junior's easy persuasion based on his teenage hormones, and wanting to close with girls. There is a missed opportunity for an ideological debate to be front and center.



Black democratic voters state that they vote Democratic because their parents vote Democratic (Baxley, 2016). Parents have a tremendous influence on an individual's political views. That was discussed in this episode, as Dre and Bow want Junior to be affiliated with the Democratic Party, because they are. In the end, Zoey (even though neither she nor Junior are voting age) convinces Junior to affiliate with the Democratic Party, because that's the values that Dre and Bow passed down to her.

This episode explores the chasm that exists between Black people and differing political views. The Black community is majority Democrat (70%), and feel that the Democratic Party has their best interests at heart, and creates policies that benefit the Black community (Maniam, 2016). Black people have a sense of community loyalty and interests that influence political beliefs. Black people often perceive the Republican Party as voting for or creating policies that hinder and oppress the Black community. This thought process has led Black people to believe that those that side with the Republican Party are not a part of the community, or they're Uncle Toms who are trying to assimilate to White culture, and abandon their Blackness. This sentiment is addressed in this episode when Dre has a fantasy when he fears his son being labeled as an Uncle Tom if he joins the Young Republicans. In a sense, it would be appalling for Junior to be a part of the Young Republicans given how "pro-Black" Dre is, and his liberal beliefs.

**"Pops' Pops' Pops'."** **Original air date: May 20, 2015.** In the season finale episode, the twins must complete a school project retracing their heritage. This is an intersectional episode because family history is universal, but during this episode encapsulates facets of Black history. This episode is metaphorically draws a line from the Harlem Renaissance to the present. The Harlem Renaissance was significant in Black culture because it was the rise of historical Black artists like Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston, and Black art, music, and literature. I

believe that this period was chosen to draw parallel between that time and Black art today. The Harlem Renaissance introduced non-Black communities to the Black experience through art, much like what *Black-ish* is doing. Also, this episode outlines the origins of the labor movement, breakdancing, and improvisational jazz from the Black American perspective.

The episode begins with the twins being dissatisfied with their family heritage. They feel that their family isn't as exciting as their classmates. That is when Pops begins to tell the family the "story" about their great-great grandfather, and how he bet on the future of the family. The entire cast of the show reprises the essence of their characters, though renamed, in the flashback. Pops plays Bippy Barnes, a sportscaster and sports bookie. Dre plays Drexel 'Drex' Johnson, the central character of the story, much like Dre is the central character in the show. Bow plays Bee, Drex's lover and a performer at the Savoy Club. Zoey plays Zora, the coat check-in girl at the Savoy Club. Junior plays Jojo, a talkative shoeshine boy. Jack and Diane play Jolly and Dolly respectively, who work for Bippy. Ruby plays Rosy, the club mistress. Mr. Stevens and Josh play Kimble and Klark respectively, owners at the advertising firm Kimble, Kollins, and Klark. Charlie plays a janitor that works for Kimble, Kollins, and Klark. Since the episode is a flashback, there are no voiceovers by Dre until the conclusion, and it is the only episode in the entire season that isn't depicted from Dre's vantage point. Pops is the only voiceover in the episode.

The story begins with Drex visiting Bee at the Savoy Club. The Savoy Club in this episode is more than likely a mashup of The Cotton Club in Harlem, and the Savoy Ballroom in Chicago, two historical Black clubs during the Harlem Renaissance that showcased up and coming jazz musicians and big band performers like Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong

(Engelbrecht, 1983). Drex wants to marry Bee, but he can't because of Elroy (played by Puff Daddy), the club owner, who feels that he owns every woman that works in his club.

The climax of the story is that Drex vies for Bee's love by challenging Elroy to a dance off. During the battle, Jolly dances in place of the club owner. They are using modern dance moves. In the end, Drex slips on ice, ironically, and loses the battle. The twist is that he bet on himself to lose, wins \$2000 and Bee's affection. Elroy threatens to kill them both, but Drex, Bee, Zora, Jojo, Jolly, and Dolly escape the club. Drex and Bee impromptu adopts the kids, and everyone lives happily ever after.

There are several metaphorical elements to this episode. The first is Kimble, Kollins, and Klark, whose notable initials are KKK referring to the Ku Klux Klan, the racist terrorist organization. Presenting Dre's present-day coworkers as part of a White supremacist organization seems to sum up how Dre feels about his coworkers and his job. They are living in the past, and aren't used to Black people being their equals. This is shown when Drex invites them to the Savoy Club, and they decline because they're White, and are too good to be at that club. Throughout the entire season, Mr. Stevens and Josh, without outright saying it, do believe that they are superior to Dre. This is evidenced by the way that they speak to him, and the racially insensitive comments that they make to him.

Charlie's flashback character, who is a janitor. On another level, this signifies that Dre is superior to Charlie. Charlie's character isn't given a name, but his is similar to the present-day Charlie with his gestures, and outlandish nature. In this episode, he claims that Langston Hughes stole his poems. He is less respected than Dre in the present, as he is in the flashback.

This episode parallels the Johnson family history with historical Black experiences. Pops gives a latent understanding of the significant Black American history, especially as it relates to

art and music. These are facts that are not well-known or taught outside of the Black community. Kenya Barris noted that he wants to show Black stories on television. Throughout the season, he accomplished that, by showing the inner workings of Black communication, experiences of Black families, and Black politics. This is concluded with this episode.

This episode appears to give validation to Black stories, and the influence of Black people in American culture. The club represents Black influence in music and pioneering jazz, which is one of the foundations of popular music. The work space represents the environment that Black people had to survive, and thrive, to elevate their economic status in corporate America. The episode is told through Pops' memory, signifying the passing of family stories from one generation to another. During one scene, Bow and Dre realize that their children are listening to Pops, and they're not on their phones. This is the first time that the children are listening intently. Not only are they learning about their family history, but the story is infused with Black cultural stories. Pops is passing down information to the next generation, so that they can be proud of their heritage, and understand their lineage.

### **Conclusion of Typology**

*Black-ish's* first season does address racialized subject matter, as Kenya Barris stated it would. However, my typology points out that the cultural subjects aren't discussed in to the same degree, and are not discussed in all the episodes. The cultural episodes are broken up with the generic episodes. Also, the depth of the cultural subject matter varies depending on the episode. It suggests that the producers are careful to not make the show too Black, or too preachy to where the audience, especially the non-Black audience, can't enjoy the program without feeling guilty about the Black experience in America. Adorno posits that this is what the culture industry does. He also states that popular cultural products do not give the audience subject matter that

they can think about. While I do agree that the cultural subjects weren't discussed in-depth enough, there are some of the episodes that can provoke discussion, mostly the intersectional episodes.

Black-ish blends the mainstream and cultural. This is prevalent not only in plotlines, but in the language. Throughout the episodes, Dre goes back and forth between using "proper English," and what is known as Black dialect. His language makes him relatable, or understandable, to Black and White audiences. As with the plotlines, as outlined in the appendix A, the plots of *Black-ish* switch back and forth between being about Black culture and being mainstream, or, as I defined them, generic. As with Dre's dialect, the switching of the plotlines makes *Black-ish* more relatable to both Black and non-Black audiences. Making *Black-ish* relatable makes it easier to sell to an audience. Adorno posits that programs must be universal for mass consumption, and this is proven in the structure of *Black-ish*. Black sitcoms, particularly those that are labeled by Means Coleman (2003) as "minstrelsy" and "neo-minstrelsy" did not rely heavily on the use of proper English, because they were being catered to the Black community, though there was universal success of those Black sitcoms.

### **Structure of *Black-ish***

Each episode of *Black-ish* follows a specific sitcom format. Adorno suggested that the formulaic nature of cultural products would limit their ability to address complex issues. According to Adorno, the formula allows audiences to comfortably anticipate resolution of complex problems. Therefore, it is worth considering how the recurring elements in *Black-ish* function in relation to Barris' stated goal of addressing the Black American experience. Four important themes emerged related to the structure of *Black-ish*: Dre's voiceovers, animation sequences, the White, male dominated workplace, and generational differences.

*Black-ish*'s structure make it easier to replicate episodes, as far as the outline of the story. However, it hinders the depth in which the subject matter can be discussed. The show is broken into five acts that last about four to five minutes each. The cultural subjects are usually explained in the first two acts, and the rest of the episode is used to resolve conflict. The complex nature of the cultural subjects is difficult to explain in that time frame, especially when there must be a finite resolution to conflict. Dre's convictions usually lead to a plan to coerce, or manipulate, his family or the situation to fit his version of what the world should be. The plan usually fails, or at least a portion to the plan, and Dre is forced to come up with an amended version of his original plan, or accept the consequences of the initial failed plan. Finally, there is the resolution, when Dre accepts the lesson that was learned throughout the episode.

**Voiceovers.** Nearly every episode begins with Dre narrating and setting up the plot for the episode. This segues into the inciting action that begins the plot line, and is usually caused by either one of his children, his wife, or at work. At times the voiceover is introducing a conflict that is already in progress, as with "Switch Hitting." Dre has strong beliefs and convictions, and that usually causes the conflict. Dre's convictions lead him to concoct a plan to convert his children or his wife to conforming to his beliefs, but with no avail. Also, it may lead him to make a decision regarding a work conflict. Ultimately to end the conflict, Dre must concede all or part of his beliefs to resolve the tension.

Throughout the episodes, Dre gives a voiceover at specific times. The voice over is Dre speaking directly to the viewing audience about what's going on in the episode. The first voiceovers in the episode are at the introduction of the episode. This is where Dre sets up the plot of the episode by talking about something that is related to the tension in the episode like his job or his family. The other time that there is a voiceover is when Dre is explaining something to the

audience that cannot necessarily be expressed in the scene, dramatically or action-wise. For instance, in the pilot episode, when Dre is speaking in a voiceover to the audience, he is explaining his position at his job where there are only a handful of Black people, and how those few Black people tend to stick together because of the environment. Dre also uses voiceovers when explaining events or trends that are significant to Black culture, like the March on Washington or the significance of “the nod.”

**Animation.** On occasion, the voiceover is accompanied by an animation sequence that visually helps explain the voiceover. Another way concepts are explained are through fantasy sequences. Dre fantasizes, in exaggeration, about the consequences of the conflict in the episode, or something that wants to happen. For example, in the “Pilot” episode, Dre is getting a promotion, and fantasizes how that will be. The fantasy sequences seem more like comedic relief to get quick laughs from the audience, and diffuse contentious moments. Also, during the cultural episodes, they seem to deflate the tension that arises from talking about heavy subjects like, racial profiling, and coded language.

**Work environment.** After the tension in the episode is introduced, Dre will typically bring the problem to his job for his coworkers input. Dre’s coworkers are a sounding board. He bounces ideas off them, and receives their advice. There are often racial, generational, and class factors that come into play during the dialogue about the conflict of the episode. The office scenes show the complex nature of office politics. The main work characters are Josh, Mr. Stevens, and Charlie. On occasion a female coworker is added, usually when the need for a female opinion is pertinent to the tension in the episode. The female coworker was only seen in scenes or episodes that involved, or called for, the female experience (i.e. the LGBTQ episode, or the episode about Dre trying to help around the house). Outside of those few episodes, the

work scenes were male driven. This is a larger problem in the actual workplace. Women often find themselves being silenced in male dominated fields.

The office of Steven & Lido represents White corporate America. Josh and Mr. Stevens represent the hierarchy in the workplace and White privilege. Their characters are presented in parody, extreme versions of real people, and their behaviors reflect that extremism to make a point in the show. Mr. Stevens who is part-owner and CEO of Stevens & Lido represents those who are so detached from the worker experience because of their status. They have no idea how those not in their position of power function. The function of the work scenes is often to mock Mr. Stevens and Josh, but they also are used to teach White people a lesson about the Black American experience. Josh's character sometimes represents privilege more than hierarchy. He usually says racially insensitive remarks because he is ignorant to his own views. During the cultural episodes, Dre explains concepts and historical experiences that are related to his White colleagues. It is usually a concept that wasn't explained in the introduction.

**Generational differences.** In the Johnson household, there are three generations represented: baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) in Ruby and Pops, generation X (born between 1965 and 1976) represented by Dre and Bow, and what's being labeled as generation Z (born after 1996) is represented by the kids, Zoey, Junior, Jack, and Diane (Bump, 2014; *Center for Generational Kinetics*, 2016). All the generations bring a different viewpoint to the tension in the episodes. The personal morals, political beliefs, and thought processes are different with each generation.

Also, the different generations represent the evolution of Black American thought, experience, and culture. The differences in the older generation and the new generation gives the show a richer and more well-rounded views of the conflicts and tensions that arise. It mimics



Black society, the vast opinions and conversations that make up the scope of Black culture, and the evolution of the culture.

Pops and Ruby came of age in a segregated society. Thus, their thoughts on the world are rooted in their Black experience. They grew up in a world that was more divided racially and politically, causing them to view the racial situations in the show differently. That is the reason Pops continually antagonizes Dre for wanting to assimilate to his surroundings. Dre and Bow came of age at a time in which the country was becoming more integrated, and communities were beginning to meld their experiences together. This causes Dre specifically to develop the skills of dealing with other ethnicities, particularly White people. This is why there is such internal conflict with Dre, as the section on double consciousness elaborates. The children have grown up in an integrated society, and have different views on race, and racial subjects. They are color-blind, for the most part, and view themselves as being a part of the community they grew up. That doesn't necessarily have any bounds on their racial identity. The writers use these generational differences to highlight attitudes about issues as when Pops and Dre disagree on the effectiveness of spanking, or when Ruby, Dre, and the children show different levels of acceptance to Rhonda's sexuality.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

Through textual analysis this research uncovered that *Black-ish* does present Black culture, but that isn't all of what encompasses the first season. There are also generic episodes in the first season that present the Johnsons as your typical American family that happens to be Black. The theoretical basis for this research was Adorno's theory of the culture industry, and that cultural products simplify complex human experiences to make them more palatable to a mass audience. Also, the presence of symbolic annihilation and stereotypes were analyzed. Kenya Barris stated a specific vision for *Black-ish*. He wanted to introduce a mainstream, non-Black audience to an affluent Black family, discuss racially charged subjects, and break long-held stereotypes of Black people. The focal point of this research was analyzing whether *Black-ish* could present Black culture and the Black American experience within a sitcom that is designed to trivialize and sanitize complex experiences. I analyzed the first season, and discovered that Black experiences and culture were discussed. In the deeper reading of the episodes, it was clear that the boundaries of the culture industry shaped the approach to the difficult subjects discussed during the cultural episodes.

### **Dre's Double Consciousness**

*Black-ish* undoubtedly addresses racial issues. As the pilot episode makes clear, the show centers on a man who struggles with the double consciousness common among Black Americans. Throughout the season, Dre is forced to deal with his own identity as a Black man operating and thriving in a White world. There is a constant tug and pull between his own version or identification as a Black man, and the assimilation, or the blending, of his identity into his White surroundings. This is the most important structural element in *Black-ish* as it provides the basis for all the episodes that deal with race.

Dre grew up in a time of more integration in communities. While not all communities were integrating, a great deal of the population experienced a more racially connected environment. Dre is the personification of W.E.B Dubois' concept of double consciousness. In *Black-ish*, there is an evolution of this identity. The fractured identity that Dubois conceives of doesn't seem to extend to Black people who have only known one identity. In this case, Dre's children, who don't appear to have the same fractured identity. According to Dubois, even if Blacks and Whites inhabit the same community, they have different experiences. Double consciousness explains that Black people have two versions of themselves: mainstream self and real self. (Dubois, 1903). These two identities can cause a Black person to lose their identity by trying to fit into two worlds.

The mainstream version of self is one that is presented to the White majority, more so in the work force. It is meant to make a Black person seem non-threatening, and more adaptable to a White, or mainstream, way of life. Dubois believed that Black people must disprove the stereotypes that Black people are disobedient, unintelligent, unruly, and barbaric. A Black person must be conscious of how the dominant, or, White, society views them to succeed, and elevate their status.

The real self is the version for the Black community. That is the self that was built through community and shared experiences. Black people live in a world that oppresses them and devalues their culture and existence. This real self allows a Black person to view themselves and their experiences through their own lens and perspective. The real self allows a Black person to be attached to the struggles of being Black in America. This can lead to fighting for social causes that advance the interests of the Black community.

These two identities exist in separate worlds that don't often overlap. This causes a Black person to have a fractured identity, because their actual self must be divided into both worlds. Dre personifies this fractured identity. Dre identifies himself in the pilot as a professional with a great family. Then he introduces himself as a Black man from Compton, CA. Dre establishes his two identities and the struggle that he faces with trying to keep them separate. When Dre goes to his work space, there is a scene in the parking lot when he concedes a parking space to a White woman. He comments that he has lost his edge, because he's no longer seen as a "big, scary, Black dude." Dre's ability to live his mainstream life has greatly diminished his real identity, or his Black self.

Dre also lives in a predominately White suburb of Los Angeles. This is a sacrifice that Black people make in their attempt to survive, and create a state of elevation, both economically and professionally. A Black person uses their mainstream self to create opportunity, because their Black self is too attached to stereotypes that are used to make Black people less-than. This sacrifice of himself has served Dre well. In the pilot episode, for example, Dre is promoted to Senior Vice President of the "Urban Division," which he identifies as "the Black stuff." At that moment, the audience is made aware of Dre's fractured identity. In his mind, he has made the sacrifices of diminishing his Black self, only to be promoted based on being Black. This points to the fact that while Black people must identify as mainstream, their White counterparts will identify their Black identity first and foremost.

The frustration that Dre feels, spills over into his home life, as he laments to his wife about the promotion. At this point his children are introduced, and, in his eyes, they are completely assimilated to their predominately White surroundings. His children are completely oblivious to Dre's sacrifice of his Black identity. The application of Dubois' concept is null and

void because the children aren't aware of the two identities that they have. The lack of knowledge about their identities frustrates Dre more so than his promotion. This is the impetus for the show. Dre tries to force his identity issues on his entire family.

### **Presence of stereotypes**

Kenya Barris stated that he wanted *Black-ish* to dispel and break the common stereotypes about Black people and Black families. When analyzing the first season of *Black-ish*, it doesn't seem that he achieved his goal. While some characters clearly challenge common representations of Black America, others do not.

The most stereotypical characters in *Black-ish* are Charlie and Ruby. Their physical presence and their personalities are aligned with historical stereotypes of Black men and women. Charlie is introduced in the third episode. He is similar to Dre in personality, but is used more as comedic relief than another perspective of the Black male experience. Charlie is the most like the sambo stereotype. A sambo is a lazy and unintelligent Black male always dependent on White people. Charlie's physical appearance along with his exaggerated facial expressions, such as bugging his eyes for comedic effect, as well as his radical suggestions that border on insane suggest that he lacks intelligence. But in all his antics, Charlie is intelligent and talented at his profession as pointed out by Mr. Stevens, though sometimes he can get in his own way with his antics.

Ruby is introduced in "Oedipal Triangle," which is the eighth episode. Before that point it was never clear if Dre's mother was present in his life. Ruby closely resembles the sapphire: an older woman, who is overweight, fiercely independent, and dedicated to her family. What makes Ruby a two-dimensional character is her relationship, albeit dysfunctional relationship, with Pops who is her ex-husband. The sapphire typically emasculates the Black man. Ruby, while

constantly insulting Pops, doesn't emasculate him. She doesn't challenge his manhood. In fact, Ruby and Pops go back and forth with insults toward each other. In episode eleven, Ruby and Pops begin the episode arguing, but later rekindle their romance, though at the end of the episode they break up at Dre's insistence. Barris claimed that he wanted to break stereotypes, but that vision isn't served with the characters of Charlie and Ruby.

While Ruby and Charlie closely resemble stereotypes, there are redeeming qualities that counteract those stereotypes. There are episodes when both characters are subdued and reasonable. An example for Charlie, in "Andre from Marseille," he explains to Dre the generational difference in views on interracial relationships. In the same episode, he also explains why Zoey is shallow. In both instances, he makes valid points that support what he's saying. These instances seem almost out of character for Charlie, but I believe that is intentional to make him seem more grounded and serious instead of the comedic relief. An example for Ruby is in "Elephant in the Room," when she explains to Dre and Bow that Junior is going to make his own choices, and that they cannot force their beliefs on him. As with Charlie, Ruby is being calm and making a valid point, and she is to be taken seriously. While these don't necessarily make up for their stereotypical behavior, it does seem as though they are to be taken seriously, even in their comedic nature.

Another stereotype that is reinforced with Pops and Ruby's relationship is that Black children grow up in broken and/or dysfunctional homes. During the "Law of Attraction" episode, the audience learns that Dre is emotionally affected by his parent's relationship. When he demands that his parents end their rekindled romance, he makes a speech about how when he was younger, they would get back together only to break up again. In subsequent episodes, there are hints at there are hints at their volatile and dysfunctional relationship. What makes this

problematic is that *Black-ish* is the only broadcast family-centered Black sitcom presently. As stated in the introduction, *Black-ish's* viewing audience is majority non-Black. This image represents Black families on television, and it's important that it do not reinforce stereotypes.

While it is true that over 60% of Black children are born to un-wed mothers, the stereotype of broken homes often implies that there is an absent parent, and that it is more than likely the father, and that isn't necessarily always the case (Jacobson, 2013). Black parents may not be together, but both can be present in their child's life. A study conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics shows that Black fathers are more present in their children's lives than Whites or Hispanics. Over 75% of Black fathers have dinner, check homework, and have regular outings with their children, even if they are not with the mother (Blow, 2015).

Though Dre is a fictional character, he is a representation of middle-aged Black males, and one of the only representations of his demographic as a broadcast television lead (Hunt, Ramon, Tran, Sargent & Diaz, 2017).

Dre's character often reinforces stereotypes of the Black community. Starting with the pilot, Dre was attempting to explain assimilation to the audience, and how White people are being praised for doing what has always been attributed to Black people, such as dancing, singing, and having big "butts." However, at the same time, this perpetuates the stereotype that those activities are only relegated to Black people, and that there are no other activities that Black people can do, or have done. I believe that this was meant to be positive and explain the value that Black people have brought to mainstream culture. However, it is still an oversimplification of the complex and expansive history of the contributions of Black people to mainstream, or non-Black, culture. Another instance of this is Dre being upset that Junior wanted to try out for the field hockey team, which Dre deemed to be a White sport. Despite that in the

last 50 years, Black people have excelled in tennis, swimming, gymnastics, and other sports, the show seems to tether Black people to basketball, football, and baseball. *Black-ish* carries on racial stereotypes.

Also, there is another form of stereotyping, and that is that advancement, “making it,” economic prosperity can only be associated with Whites. The entire show is about Dre making it out of the hood, and into the White community. The White community that is safer, cleaner, with better schools, and low crime. Even in a show about the advancement of Black people, it is placed up against how affluent White people live. All White communities aren’t the same. There are poor White communities, especially in rural areas. All Black communities aren’t the same. There are affluent Black communities, particularly along the eastern seaboard. Kenya Barris breaks no barriers with his upholding of White affluence, and Black disparity. The show assumes that all Black people are poor and work for miniscule money, but that isn’t the case. As stated in the analysis of episode two, there are Black families that come from generation wealth. Granted that the number of affluent Black families are smaller than White families, but they do exist nonetheless. And their existence isn’t defined by a White American standard of living.

### **Trivialization of significant Black cultural events.**

The cultural episodes in the first season relate to the significant events in the Black American experience. These events include the Civil Rights Movement, ramifications of slavery, and the use of coded language. Adorno theorized that the culture industry shies away from discussing complex subjects. Furthermore, symbolic annihilation suggests that underrepresented communities, like the Black community, have their existence and experiences diminished or ignored by the dominant group. Both theories are illustrated in the first season of *Black-ish*.



Dre explains many of the significant cultural experiences to the audience. These explanations are riddled with humor or levity, because of their complexity and uncomfortable nature. For instance, in the “The Dozens” episode, Dre explained that the concept of “the dozens” came from slavery, but he doesn’t explain that it was the result of the treatment from the slave master. Instead, he explains that it came from African tribes talking about each other until one conceded to the other. This humorous explanation of “the dozens” makes the ramifications of slavery seem less impactful than it is.

Since *Black-ish* is a sitcom, humorous dialogue is fitting. However, it is problematic when discussing complex and serious subject matter such as racial profiling, the Civil Rights movement, and interracial dating. *Black-ish* uses satire: humor that critiques societal ills through exaggerated humor, characters, and situations. The satire of the show is meant as commentary to accompany Dre’s perspective. The satire usually makes fun of racial situations, even if the episode isn’t about race or racism. Satire can be effective in making serious subjects or commentary funny. But satire is only effective if the audience or viewer is aware of the satirical nature of the issue being discussed (Haggins, 2009; Birthisel & Martin, 2013). I think this should be taken into consideration given that *Black-ish*’s has a non-Black majority viewing audience. That viewing audience may not be aware that certain jokes are satirical, and meant to point out the ridiculous comments or social situations that the Black characters find themselves in. With the absence of satirical knowledge, a well-intentioned dialogue or monologue can be counterproductive to advancing goals of making the audience understand their own flaws. The result can be the trivialization of issues.

Another way that complex subjects are explained is through animation. “The dozens” was explained with an animation sequence. Animation is typically used for children’s

programming. In this instance, explaining racialized subject matter through animation seems to reduce the seriousness of the subject matter into child-like form. This may have been done so that the writers had a fun and lighthearted way to explain difficult subjects so as not to lose the audience. This supports Adorno's theory that the culture industry is not made to cultivate critical thought, but rather sell products.

Sometimes explaining the subjects can get too serious, and these serious moments are broken up with humor. For instance, when Dre is speaking to the audience about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., he begins with the impact of the Civil Rights Movement. During this introduction to the episode, there are montages of the Dr. King and the marches. At the point where it seems that the introduction is becoming too much of a lesson on Black history, Dre comments on how nice Dr. King's mustache looked during the Civil Rights Movement. It turns a history lesson into a joke about something as superficial as a moustache. Adorno states that the culture industry is obsessed with the superficial, and that is proven during this introduction.

Lastly, sometime the cultural experiences are trivialized by showing Black people playing the victim when it comes to systematic oppression and racism. This happens throughout the entire season. Dre tries to find racism in every interaction with White people, even when there isn't. In the episode about Dr. King, Dre tries to teach his son about racism that Black men face by their existence. But in each scene, his lesson is a farce, because it is presented to the audience that Dre is overreacting. This also happens in an episode about coded language. Bow accuses an announcer at Jack's baseball game of racist language, but no one, not even Dre, finds anything wrong with the language being used. This made Bow seem like she's trying to pull the race card when it is unnecessary. Both instances greatly diminish the real experiences that Black people have concerning racism, and racist views. The mission of the show is contradictory,

because it switches from showing and explaining certain racial situations, but also treats those situations with levity. This trivializes the nature and seriousness of racial micro-aggressions and implicit or explicit racism. People's racial biases are real, and they can be expressed explicitly or implicitly. It is misleading to present racism, in whatever form it comes, as Black victimization.

Most of the Black historical events are simplified, or are told in half-truths. In one episode, it is admitted that talking about serious subjects isn't appealing to viewership. Barris stated that he wanted to talk about uncomfortable subjects, but his vision isn't served by diminishing the significance of the Black experience, which is uncomfortable, especially when discussing the reverberating effects of slavery. This directly proves Adorno's theory of the culture industry, and its nature to simplify and lighten serious and complex themes.

## **Conclusion**

To return to the research question, *Black-ish* does address Black culture but only to the extent of acknowledging that Black culture exists. However, the depth of subject is lacking. I believe that this is due to two things. One, the time constraints that exists in sitcoms. All episodes of *Black-ish* usually run around 21-22 minutes, and that doesn't allot for time the complex history of Black history. Two, many of the cultural subjects discussed are broken up with humor. This signals that the subject matter, no matter how serious, is still something to laugh at. Adorno's theory of the culture industry is valid. *Black-ish* is hindered by the boundaries of the culture industry. Complex subjects were trivialized to appeal to the largely White audience and stereotypes are used to fit the aesthetic of a sitcom. The show often fails to show the full scope of Blackness and Black stories.

Since *Black-ish* is the first successful Black sitcom to air on broadcast in almost a decade, it will be the litmus test for other Black sitcoms that follow. In accordance with Adorno's theory,

*Black-ish* will be the standard by which writers, creators, and network executives will gauge the success of their predominately Black cast sitcoms. This is exemplified for the 2017-2018 ABC fall lineup. *Black-ish* is being moved to Tuesdays to be the lead-in for *The Mayor* (2017), a new show with a predominately Black cast. The show centers on a rapper named Courtney Rose, played by Brandon Michael Hall, who runs a political campaign as a publicity stunt and wins the mayoral seat in his small town (Wagmeister, 2017 Ausiello, 2017). ABC has enough confidence that *The Mayor* could be the next *Black-ish*. That speaks to the replication of cultural products, as Adorno posits.

### **Implications of this research**

Diversity in television is an ongoing conversation. As the call for more representative images of minorities intensifies, there will be more programming to fit that need. The images that will be shown to the audience must provide a range of experiences and subject matter that will engage an audience, and create more dialogue and spark more changes in the television. The programming that will follow the demand for diversity will not be effective if the programming features people of color who are reinforcing stereotypes or symbolically annihilating the experience of minorities in America. This research shows that a sitcom that features a minority-led cast must speak to, and about, minority culture in different ways, and do that effectively without diminishing racialized subjects, or reintroducing racial stereotypes.

### **Future Study**

For future study, I would like to analyze the next two seasons of *Black-ish*. The first season of any show is a foundation season, and that may have affected the content that I analyzed. Now that there have been two more seasons, the way that the show presents subject matter, may have changed. Also, there are more cultural subjects that are discussed, such as the

n-word and selling out. Additionally, I would like to conduct a focus group of Black and non-Black viewers of *Black-ish*, and gauge their responses to the cultural episodes to better analyze whether the presentation of Black culture is resonating with viewers.

## Appendix

<u>Episode</u>	<u>Title/Writer</u>	<u>Original Airing Date</u>	<u>Plot Summary</u>	<u>Classification</u>
1	"Pilot" by Kenya Barris	September 24, 2014	Introduction to the Johnson family. Dre is up for a promotion at work.	<b>Cultural</b>
2	"The Talk" by Vijal Patel	October 1, 2014	Dre talks to Junior about sex when he catches him masturbating.	Generic
3	"The Nod" by Kenya Barris	October 8, 2014	Dre tries to show Junior to importance of Black male acknowledgement.	<b>Cultural</b>
4	"Crazy Mom" by Gail Lerner	October 15, 2014	Dre feels the pressure of being the "snack dad."	Generic
5	"Crime and Punishment" by Corey Nickerson	October 22, 2014	Dre battles with the decision to spank Jack.	<b>Cultural</b>
6	"The Prank King" by Lindsey Shockley	October 29, 2014	Dre is upset when his children are no longer interested in Halloween.	Generic
7	"The Gift of Hunger" by Peter Saji	November 12, 2014	Dre feels that his children are "privileged," and he makes them get jobs to show them the value of hard work.	Generic
8	"Oedipal Triangle" by Vijal Patel	November 19, 2014	Dre's mother comes to visit the family.	Generic
9	"Colored Commentary" by Yvette Lee Bowser	December 3, 2014	Bow is upset when Dre doesn't stand up for her during Jack's baseball game.	<b>Cultural</b>
10	"Black Santa/White Santa" by Gail Lerner	December 10, 2014	When the company Santa dies suddenly, Dre jumps at the chance to be the company's first Black Santa.	<b>Cultural</b>

11	"Law of Attraction" by Corey Nickerson	January 7, 2015	Dre deals with his parent's dysfunctional relationship. The family goes skiing on MLK day. Dre tries to show Junior the relevancy of racial prejudice when Junior doesn't recognize the significance of MLK day.	Generic
12	"Martin Luther Skiing Day" by Lindsey Shockley	January 14, 2015	Dre and Bow get into an argument on Valentine's Day.	Generic
13	"Big Night, Big Fight" by Vijal Patel	February 11, 2015	Dre is upset when Zoey begins dating a White exchange student from France.	Cultural
14	"Andre from Marseille" by David Hemingson	February 18, 2015	Dre teaches Junior "the dozens," when he is being bullied at school.	Cultural
15	"The Dozens" by Peter Saji	February 25, 2015	Dre and Bow's parents clash when they all visit the family for Dre and Bow's wedding anniversary.	Generic
16	"Parental Guidance" by Corey Nickerson	March 4, 2015	Dre is upset about turning 40, and losing his swag.	Generic
17	"30 Something" by Courtney Lilly	March 25, 2015	Dre fears Bow is pregnant when her period is late.	Generic
18	"Sex, Lies, and Vasectomies" by Gail Lerner	April 1, 2015	Bow's college friends come to visit.	Generic
19	"The Real World" by Scott Weigner	April 8, 2015	Dre's Blackness is challenged when he tries to win an account for the firm.	Cultural
20	"Switch Hitting" by Kenya Barris	April 22, 2015	Bow becomes lenient with Zoey in an effort to become closer to her.	Generic
21	"The Peer-ent Trap" by Yvette Lee Bowser	April 29, 2015		

22	"Please Don't Ask, Please Don't Tell" by Peter Saji	May 6, 2015	Dre's sister Rhonda, visits for Mother's Day. He feels that his sister isn't being upfront about her sexuality.	<b>Cultural</b>
23	"Elephant in the Room" by Courtney Lilly	May 13, 2015	Dre is mortified when Junior wants to join the Young Republicans group at school.	<b>Cultural</b>
24	"Pops' Pops' Pops" by Vijal Patel	May 20, 2015	Pops tells the kids a story about their great great- grandfather, when the twins must complete a school project about their family history.	<b>Cultural</b>



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Zook, K. B. (1999). *Color by Fox: The Fox network and the revolution in black television*. Oxford University Press.

## Jasmine Vickers

[jvickers@syr.edu](mailto:jvickers@syr.edu)

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jasmine-vickers-a070b442/>

### Education

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
Master of Arts: Media Studies (May 2018)

Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC), Carbondale, IL  
Bachelor of Arts, Radio/TV (May 2012)

- Illinois Broadcasters Association Student Silver Dome Award recipient, 2012

Harold Washington College, Chicago, IL  
Associate of Arts (May 2010)

### Research

- Vickers, J. (2018) Thesis: *Black or Blackish: Decoding Black-ish and its place in the conversation of diversity*
- Frazier, A.A., Hatcher King, K., Vickers, J. (2016). *Reality TV: Entertaining...but no laughing matter* (Presented at Adage Advertising Week 2017, New York City, and the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Legislative Conference of the Congressional Black Caucus 2017, Washington, D.C)
- Birkhead, H., Long, P., Vickers, J., Yan, Y. (2015). *Power Women: Exploring the effects of Political Women on Television* (Presented at Popular Culture Association 2015 Annual conference, New Orleans)

### Research Interests

- Television, Diversity in television, stereotypes, entertainment industry, television production, television business, entertainment law, critical cultural theory

## Related Classes

- Producing Workshop, Communications Theory, Theories of Media Content. Critical and Cultural Theory, Law, Politics, and Media, Constitutional Law II,

## Work experience

**Front Desk Concierge**, JLL, Chicago IL                      November 2017-February 2018

- Assist clients to their meetings
- First contact with various high profile clients
- Stock floors with supplies

**Consumer Fraud Analyst**, Groupon, Chicago, IL                      October 2016-July 2017

- Analyze customer accounts
- Research customer profiles for company website

**Instructional Associate**, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY August 2014-May 2016

- Assist professors with class and lectures
- Grade papers and quizzes

**Research Assistant**, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY    June 2015-August 2015

- Assist faculty member with research paper
- Analyzing data for advertising research
- Assist advertising and marketing team members with data analysis

**Production Assistant**, R.R. Donnelley, Chicago, IL February 2013-August 2014

- Assist sales team and regional managers
- Proofread materials
- Check for errors in live mailing samples
- Maintain weekly work schedules using Microsoft Excel
- Data entry using Microsoft Excel

## Skills

- Microsoft office, NVivo, SPSS, Mac OS, PC OS, Final Cut Pro, Quantitative and Qualitative Media Research, Media and Entertainment Research, Public Relations, Television Promotion research, Social media- Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Weebly