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 The State of EMPOWERMENT…

                        Rough Draft

The media representation of any cultural community creates positive and negative connotations on the social, educational, and political work of these communities. Yet, women do not need a negative connotation or background to be empowered. The media’s portrayal of the African American woman has a societal effect on the community. Through this the community defines and defeats negative stereotypes of women in the workforce and domestic lifestyle. As a result, some of the televised programs such as *Good Times, The Cosby Show, Being Mary Jane,* reinforce a positive and empowered outlook on the role that African American women have in society.

The African American woman have been known to be plaque by certain stereotypes. For instance; they are angry, they emasculate their men, they are all overweight or out of shape, they are sexually inhibited, they are desperate, they have “daddy issues”, they have too high standards, and so on. Moreover, the media has represented the African American woman as crazy, bitter, and ghetto/“black”. Therefore; the representation of African American women has been tarnished and woman of color growing up in this world are unable to escape it. In the shows listed beforehand, the woman counteracts each stereotype. They all differently have their own representation of the African American woman.

*Good Times* was a television show that was one of many that began to exhibit an African American family in a different perspective. *Good Times* was set in a poverty-stricken American inner city that displayed a struggling African American family life in the ghetto. “*Good Times* was a success from the beginning because it offered solace for both black and white families who were dealing with these same sorts of problems” (Blackshear). *Good Times* followed the lines of society lifestyle for an African American. However; *Good Times* took those stereotypical views exploited them and made comedy out of them. During the show, the leading woman character Florida Evans, the wife and mother of three children, did her best to give and provide her family with a better chance in life. For she was the glue that held everything together. Florida Evans, but a woman of few words represents wisdom and that voice of reason to African American women.

In Blackshear article she argues Evans character:

“While on the exact opposite hand, we are plagued with the recurring image of the nurturing mammy or auntie.  The mammy was always asexual, obese, very dark skinned and smiling.  The mammy would always instill the ways of white folk to her family; she was their representative in the slave quarters.  She would make sure that the other slaves were doing what the master said, and relay this information back to the master.   Florida Evans fit perfectly into this character type.  She was dark skinned, full figured, and was always smiling and conforming to the ways of the government. Any time that James would find a way to get some quick money for the rent, Florida would always be that “master” in his ear, telling him to repent and turn from his evil ways.  In the show, Florida was never portrayed as being sexy; instead she was rather old and unattractive.  She was constantly cooking, cleaning, [sewing], singing, praying and doing all the things that happy darkies supposedly love to do.”

Blackshear and other viewers have misconstrued Florida Evan characters traits. She is not a mammy because she is nurturing and cheerful. She is not a mammy because she cooks and cleans. She is a mother and she is doing her motherly duties. According to Webster Dictionary, the definition of a mammy is a black woman serving as a nurse to white children especially formerly in the southern United States. Her family is African American therefore disqualifying her as a mammy. Florida Evan is simply a mother doing her best by her family.

In addition; *The Cosby Show* in comparison to *Good Times* was created to show African American families in a different light. Furthermore; *The Cosby Show* would portray African-Americans in more of a positive light, as opposed to the violent, lethargic and poverty-stricken images often portrayed to the American public through mass media. *The Cosby Show* shied away from the stereotypical judgments that was already set in stone about African American families. This sitcom portrayed African Americans through a lens that the American public have never seen. It created both positive and negative reactions from fans and critics for its role in the debate over stereotypical behavior. For this show created a theory: "The American Dream" that challenged previous views of African American.

Clair Huxtable is a prime example of this. Not only a beautiful face, but an educated woman. Clair Huxtable paved the road for women to be triumphant. Setting the bar, she changed the views of an African American woman from bitter and crazy to loving and successful. Mrs. Huxtable proves that an African American woman can be more than a housewife that is played by Florida Evans, but rather a working mother. She takes care of both her five kids and husband while maintaining a successful career. Clair Huxtable became known as a feminist because she was not portraying the “traditional” role of a woman. She stood firmly and had the support of her husband behind her career and decisions. “…never misses an opportunity to shoot down the sexist views.” Clair Huxtable rose above the sexist ways of men and did not let it slow her down.

On the contrary, one of the main disputes concerning *The Cosby Show* has to do with the racial implications that it carried. The Huxtable’s, an all-African American family who lived in a prominent neighborhood just outside of a major city did not present the realism of what America said of an African American family. To add to the grandeur of the Huxtable’s, the father was a doctor, the mother was a successful lawyer, and the family would eventually see their children attend prestigious colleges and this idea were UNIMAGINABLE thoughts to the viewers. To some, *The Cosby Show* represented false hopes of what African Americans could never obtained and accomplish. For, these accomplishments, unfortunately, did not mirror the reality of the typical. African-American family. The contrast between The Cosby Show and reality brought forth many important questions, questions that challenged the legitimacy of the show on a societal level.

“For some reason, many people had felt that wealthy black families were not in [existence]. ‘The Cosby Show’ had challenged this idea and had presented a successful African American family that became successful through fighting through the struggles and conflict in the past. The ideology is that without the struggle and conflict, the [portrayal] of an upper-middle class African American family would have been [non-existent].

“Even though ‘The Cosby Show’ and ‘Good Times’ had represented African American families in an opposite way, both shows had positive representation of a black family. With these positive representations of a black family, both shows presented realistic issues of everyday life within a family household in which were the main ideological ideas behind the shows.”

Presenting present-day realism, the protagonist in *Being Mary Jane* provides a positive and realistic representation of an African American woman. According to Janell Hazelwood,

“Mary Jane was like many of us: professional, hard-working and super supportive in helping family, but she had major fails and flops in love. She was vulnerable, real, relatable and triumphant in that she went through the mess and came out on top, choosing to love herself and remain single versus dealing with nonsense from a man.”

Mary Jane provides a way of life for her family despite the emotional obstacles of being a financial provider and foundation for her family. Broken, damaged, and lost Mary Jane embraces adversity. Through her own time of difficulty, she continues to put others first. Not only supporting her family financially, she is supporting them emotionally as well.

    Nonetheless, *Being Mary Jane* brought a lot of controversy. Some of the audience were tired of the same story-line that African American are displaying. Hence; Hazelwood standpoint of the issue:

“The consistent, seemingly on-trend, saturation of negative TV depictions of power women of color, who are so weak and irresponsible with matters of the heart and self-respect. How these depictions just, yet again, add to that age-old stereotype that black women in general are objects *not* of a man’s highest devotion and respect, but only worthy of lust and love’s table scraps”

Mary Jane does not represents a man’s “lust or love’s table scraps”. For she does not necessarily fall into the story-line that African Americans are playing on television. She fell in love with a man whom happen to be married, but she had no knowledge of the marriage. Mary Jane did what most people do not have the guts to do which is admit the affair to the spouse. She took the high road and acknowledge her wrong in the relationship. Although she slept with a married man and fought her heart, she cut off all ties to him. Mary Jane represent the single African American woman who is independent and is doing everything on her own. Let us keep in mind that she is providing a life for her whole entire family. She is not only caring for herself, but her sick mother, her tired father, her pregnant niece, and strung-out, sneaky brothers. She is an educated and reachable woman trying her best to put together her broken heart and right her wrongs.

Some are viewing African-American portrayals as if we are back to watching movies in black and white where African-Americans were only the help or the servant to whites and were briefly there to satisfy their needs and when they are done to serve their “masters” wife. Those viewpoints are no longer valid. African-American woman today are no longer seen as the mammy to whites. For they are not a black nursemaid or nanny in charge of white children or taking care of them as their primary job on television, they are business women, lawyers, entrepreneurs.

In conclusion, the media representation of African American continues to circulate those negative stereotypes and children watching are being molded and shaped by them woman. A two parent-home where both parents have jobs and are providing a great life for their children will no longer be a far-fetched idea, but rather a reality. Changing the mindset of the population each show developed a new impression of the African American woman. With these shows, African American women growing up in this world are now able to turn their ears away from the negativity that the media spreads and listen to the real portrayals of women of color.

It’s not about supplication, it’s about power. It’s not about asking, it’s about demanding. It’s not about convincing those who are currently in power, it’s about changing the very face of power itself.

**-** [**Kimberle Williams Crenshaw**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kimberl%C3%A9_Williams_Crenshaw)

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