Document Citation

Title	**Evolution of black images in television traced in 'Color adjustment'**
Author(s)	
Source	*California Newsreel*
Date	1991
Type	press release
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Color adjustment, Riggs, Marlon, 1992

For Release at Will

EVOLUTION OF BLACK IMAGES IN TELEVISION TRACED IN "COLOR ADJUSTMENT"

No institution better illustrates the James Baldwin quote which begins **Color Adjustment** than television: "The country's image of the Negro, which hasn't very much to do with the Negro, has never failed to reflect with a kind of terrifying accuracy the state of mind of the country."

Color Adjustment, a landmark documentary study of prejudice and perception in the Television Age, scrutinizes the interplay between America's racial consciousness and 40 years of television's depictions of African Americans from **Amos 'n' Andy** to **The Cosby Show.**

World War II gave birth simultaneously to two of the most powerful forces shaping contemporary America: the civil rights movement and broadcast television. Television quickly assumed an ever-expanding role in America's post-war baby boom families, defining the American dream night after night.

But as black soldiers returned from defending democracy in Europe primed with expectation, they found that this glittering new technology looked to the past for its initial programming. The get-rich-quick schemes and malapropisms of the jobless buffoon Kingfish, star of **Amos 'n' Andy,** reassured white America that black people were comically ill-equipped for equality. While African Americans were challenging school segregation in the Supreme Court, **Beulah** was saying they had only one role in America's prime time family: contented servant.

By 1957, African Americans finally could watch proudly as Nat King Cole became the first black TV host welcomed into America's living rooms. But as civil rights unrest grows and black people begin demanding admission to the Dream, Southern whites saw the suave Cole as a threatening symbol of integration - and a nervous network, unable to find a sponsor, dropped the show.

African American's contentious cries for inclusion in the "family" would soon dominate the evening news, but an hour later in prime time black people would be almost invisible. The old racial myths of inferiority might no longer be acceptable, but the networks, unable to confront the messy and the troublesome, shrunk from creating new roles. Instead, wholesome family shows like **Lassie, Father Knows Best,** and **Leave It to Beaver** dominated the schedule and maintained the fantasy of a neat, stable and everlasting society.

How could the traditionally safe, "feel good" medium represent black aspirations yet win high ratings among whites?

Bill Cosby's **I Spy** and Diahann Carroll's **Julia** provided the initial answers. Carroll along with producer's Hal Kanter (**Julia**) and Sheldon Leonard (**I Spy**) recount how it was safe to "integrate" prime time only after a new consensus finally emerged after the landmark Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. But the new shows portrayed only successful, assimilated "white Negroes" effortlessly absorbed into an idealized community. Prejudice and white backlash were non-issues. By accepting black people into the American family without the family itself having to change, these shows shepharded a new myth, that of inclusion, not exclusion.

By the late '60s urban insurrection, "white backlash," the anti-war movement and youth counter-culture were tearing the "American family" apart. TV innovator Norman Lear explains how he used comedy to accomodate the explosive social conflicts of the '60s "all in the family."

Lear's series **Good Times** also broke new ground by focusing on the hardships and triumphs of ghetto life. But Esther Rolle recalls how enthusiastic audience response to the sambo-like "J.J" character led to a relapse into familiar, exaggerated comic antics and turned the series into a kind of televised minstrel show.

With **Roots,** prime time finally found a way to acknowledge black oppression without fundamentally challenging American mythology. By the time **Roots** was broadcast the urgency of the civil rights movement was expiring and the country stood at a turning point. Would we continue to progress, or would we retreat into the familiar denial and complacency of the past? Producer David Wolper says he deliberately framed the saga of Kunta Kinte as a "black Horatio Alger" story. White Americans easily identified with a family overcoming tragedy and hardship through unity, determination and individual effort. **Roots** reinforced the comforting ideal of American racial progress while obfuscating the harsh reality of the millions of black people still left behind.

In a sense **The Cosby Show** updates **Roots** for the "post Civil Rights Reagan-Bush era." Echoing conservative calls for "self-reliance' and "family values," **Cosby** reaffirms '50s ideology in a '90s guise - a hip, upscale, black **Father Knows Best.** It affirmed for viewers that the American system could work for all.

The movement of African Americans into primetime TV is intimately entwined with the larger movement to win black people full citizenship in American life. At the same time, important aspects of the black experience are still grossly distorted or missing altogether from the medium. Network programming reflects divisive social issues even while absorbing them into the familiar, unthreatening formats of primetime entertainment. A close look at the images will help us all re-examine America's - and our own - ambivalent attitudes towards race.

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