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Living Single: An Exploration of Race, Sexuality & Gender

A beloved 90s sitcom that takes place in New York, featuring six friends in their mid-20s, showcasing love and heartbreak, career achievements and setbacks, and mainly an enjoyable and easy-to-watch show. This might immediately sound like a description of the NBC show *Friends*, when in actuality it refers to the first series that tackles this plot, Fox's *Living Single*. The television show, created and written by Yvette Lee Bowser, explores the lives of young Black Americans living in Brooklyn. The show centers four Black women and their interactions with their jobs, romances, interpersonal conflicts, and dealings with day-to-day life. Ultimately, *Living Single* exists as a text that both reflects and challenges dominant narratives, while focusing on the celebration of female characters and their interactions with Blackness.

Tackling Racism

Living Single both subverts and reproduces dominant narratives of Black life. Compared to previous programs that only featured, tokenized, or assimilated Black characters into whiteness, *Living Single* is significant in its centering of Black women while airing on a major network in the mid 90s. In *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, author Herman Gray divides Black television into three categories: assimilationist, pluralist, and multiculturalist. Assimilationist television describes texts that treat racism as an interpersonal problem, engages in respectability politics, and celebrates color blindness whereas multiculturalist texts engage in diverse and subversive material while

examining the nuances of Black communities. According to Gray, *Living Single* occupies the pluralist category as it takes a separate-but-equal approach towards race relations. He remarks that “in this television world, blacks and whites are just alike save for minor differences of habit and perspective developed from African American experiences in a homogeneous and monolithic black world.” Though the characters each have their own individual problems and perspectives, their relationship towards Blackness remains relatively the same; there is an emphasis on unity and ultimately, a monolithic view of nuanced and complicated issues.

Because *Living Single* creates a world in which Blackness is both celebrated and viewed as the standard, the show often avoids tackling race-related issues in an overt way. Though racial identities are in no way ignored, there are few episodes that speak to the insidious nature of racism. In the season 2 episode “A Hair-Razing Experience,” Kyle, one of two male characters of the show, is told by Lawrence, his Black colleague, that his dreadlocks do not match the corporate image of his brokerage firm and that his appearance stands in the way of his desired promotion. Kyle finds himself in a moral dilemma stuck between the whiteness of work life and the Blackness of his identity.

REGINE: Well that’s the great thing about wearing wigs. I mean you can be whoever they want on the outside but underneath the nylon, the pins, and the practical no-sweat band, you’re you!

KYLE: But my dreads are an expression of my culture. If I change my hair wouldn’t that be sellin’ out?”

MAX: Kyle, you’re a stock broker. You’re a sellout either way.

REGINE: Kyle, maybe you should try working within the system just ‘til you get into a position of power. And then you can tell everybody else how to wear their hair.

KYLE (pensively): You know, I have worked too hard and come too far to let something like my hair hold me back now.

In her first line of dialogue, Regine implicitly references white people through the use of the pronoun “they” but does not necessarily confirm this assertion; she could be talking about society as a whole or specifically Kyle’s brokerage firm, but her statement is ultimately vague and non-accusatory. Kyle emphasizes the cultural ties he has to his hair but refrains from saying what culture specifically nor does he mention race. Regine’s second line of dialogue suggests that Kyle conform for now and revert back later when he has the chance. Furthermore, it is never verbalized what exactly Kyle must conform to. Though the show hints at whiteness being the issue, it is not discussed as a systemic issue but rather as a specific occurrence. Khadija asserts, “Kyle you must know that when you work in the corporate world, sometimes you have to conform to get ahead.” Once again, the topic of conformity is a corporate world issue, and the show does not address the ways in which professionalism and whiteness are inextricably tied.

Though, considering the period as well as the show being a part of the Fox Network, it’s likely that Yvette Lee Bowser, the show’s writer and creator, wanted the show to be more subversive. The ending of the episode features Kyle giving a speech to Lawrence and his two white colleagues, declaring that he will not change his hairstyle. The live audience applauds loudly after Kyle asserts that his hair is a symbol of his pride for his heritage and not simply a fashion decision. This is touted as a redemption, a character staying true to who they are, and a slight insert of progressive thought. While the show recognizes that the issue of Black hairstyles and professionalism exists on a macro-level, their failure to verbalize this assertion makes the meaning of the episode solely interpersonal. The episode, as well as

the rest of the show, treats white characters as well-meaning and a bit foolish, further aligning the text with Gray's pluralist viewpoint. It is revealed that his two white colleagues were not even considering Kyle's hair a problem until Lawrence brought it up. This places the blame for hairstyle discrimination onto Black people, failing to hold white people accountable for their discriminatory behavior.

This scene exemplifies that multiple decoded messages a viewer could internalize, especially when it's a moment that concerns a contested social issue. The dominant ideology is ultimately de-racialized, focusing more on the personal endeavor of standing up for one's self and resisting conformity. The message is ultimately polysemic as some viewers could agree with this ideology, while other audience members might decode this moment as a failure to accurately portray microaggressive behavior in the workplace; the end of the episode could suggest that these types of interactions don't even occur, or at least not from the hands of white people. Or, some might recognize the nuances of this situation, considering the genre as well as period of the show, but otherwise understand how the policing of Black hairstyles was, and still is, a prevalent issue in American society. Nonetheless, the dominant ideology does not suggest that systemic changes should be made but rather that conformity as a concept should be resisted.

Interacting with Queerness

When interacting with queerness, the show often exhibits Ron Becker's gay-panic tropes of the 90s, centering straight characters in these plotlines and using humor to undercut tension. In the season 3 episode "Woman to Woman," Max is forced to grapple with her opinions on homosexuality as her friend Shayla reveals her upcoming marriage to a woman. When Chris, Shayla's fiancée enters the apartment, a laugh track plays as Synclaire, Max, and Regine stare with surprise. This moment signals

to the audience that two things about this situation are comical. Firstly, it pokes fun at the dumbfounded response of the straight characters. Regine's response of "hey....girl" and Synclaire's reaction of removing the groom statuettes, further emphasizes how unexpected this situation is, calling attention to the fact that homosexuality remains abnormal to straight characters; even if they are supportive of Chris and Shayla, their lesbian identity remains a topic of interest rather than a normative existence.

Secondly, the humor relies on Chris' lack of knowledge about the women's response. She stands in the doorway, grinning widely, acting as though her presence is completely normal, which the other characters remind the audience that it is not. Furthermore, this scene occurs at the very beginning of the episode lasting just over two minutes before moving into the theme song. By choosing this placement, it treats queerness as a shock factor, rather than a well integrated aspect of the plot. Chris and Shayla don't exist as dynamic characters, but rather as a backdrop for straight characters to understand themselves. There are many instances of other characters showing their ignorance of queer culture and identity, like Regine dressing in sweats and a baseball hat because she is worried that the women at the Bachelorette party will flirt with her, failing to realize that this expression reproduces lesbian stereotypes. When talking about her lack of queer exposure, Synclaire remarks that "Aunt Gladys isn't gay. She just never found the right man. Like her roommate Aunt Hazel." Once again, this character is seemingly facing queerness head on, but her heterosexual perspective blinds her from reality. However, because Max was the last to know about Shayla's identity, her interaction with queerness goes below a surface level understanding, viewing it as a deception.

Later on in the episode, Shayla discloses to Max that she was in love with her during college, and that those feelings lingered until meeting Chris. When she reveals this, Max's eyes widen and her face shows a shocked and slightly scared expression. The laugh-track plays, once again using queer verbalization as shock value and an instance of humor rather than sincerity; instead of centering Shayla's feelings, the camera stays on Max, showing the audience that this moment is about her and her straightness. This scene additionally fuels negative stereotypes, treating lesbians as desperate women with an unrequited love for their heterosexual friends. This treatment can be dangerous as it leans into tropes of queerness as a form of predatory behavior. When Max eventually tries to verbalize her thoughts, her dialogue is shaky as she trips over her words: "Now uh...Now, wait a minute. You...you were what? You felt what? You said what?" The gay panic that Becker outlines becomes abundantly clear in this moment, recognizing that Max feels insecure about her relationship with Shayla despite that fact that the feelings discussed no longer exist.

Max only thinks of Shayla's queerness in relation to her own straightness and even if she does not view the existence of homosexuality in a negative light, when it enters her personal life, she does not know how to react. Becker notes that "straight Americans were increasingly forced to think about their own sexual identity amid this confusing discursive context. Once oblivious to its heterosexuality and naïve about the privileges that came with it, Straight America had to acknowledge both." Due to the normative standard of heterosexuality, Max never saw her straightness as an identity but rather an assumed make-up of her personhood that is not regularly challenged. Shayla does not re-appear for the rest of the show, further emphasizing her existence as a plot device for Max and the other straight characters to interact and grapple with. She is not a dynamic character, nor does the audience

understand her outside her queerness; she has one role and that is to foil Max's ignorance of her own sexuality. Additionally, the show does not feature any other explicitly gay episodes, using "Woman to Woman" as a tokenized event. Because the characters have interacted with homosexuality once, why would it need to happen again?

This episode's encoded message is ultimately pro-gay but still centers straight characters and does not contain a subversive or meaningful ideology on the topic of queerness. Hall notes that "Production and reception of the television message are not, therefore, identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative Process as a whole." Some viewers could decode Max's reaction as natural or justified while others might recognize how Max makes Shayla's identity about herself. Some might even take it a step further and believe that this episode is not meant to be agreed with, but rather point out the distorted ways in which straight people understand queerness. Or, some audience members will appreciate the representation of queer Black women on screen, when this occurrence is still marginal in a contemporary context. These polysemic meanings make it difficult to know how an audience will perceive the text, making implicit subversiveness oftentimes impossible, if it's even present at all. Overall, a viewer's 'framework of knowledge' and previous knowledge of both queerness and Blackness will affect the connection to hegemony.

Subversion of Black Female Identity

Though *Living Single* often fails to critique racial politics and centers heterosexuality, the text does offer a positive portrayal of Black women and challenges normative gender hierarchies. The show centers the lives of Max, Synclaire, Khadijah, and Regine, portraying their triumphs and defeats and

creating well-rounded dynamic characters. While Overton and Kyle often occupy their own plots or storylines involving the women, it is clear that they mainly exist as love interests and comic relief. Though their characters do change as the show continues, they are not the main point of attention. A Jet article states that “as the show evolves... viewers will see various sides of the women, the secure and insecure sides, the bonding, laughing, hugging and screaming.” The combined efforts of female characters written by women alongside shaping the show around these characters, aids in resisting stereotypical or offensive portrayals. Though the women spend a lot of their time lamenting over romantic conquests, Bowser makes it clear that the show is not about those men but rather their female perspective. An episode in season 2 entitled “They’ve Gotta Have It” features a plot in which Max and Regine attend a conference aimed at becoming less reliant on men. Though they fail to ‘date themselves’ the women realize the nuances of their position as women; they recognize that while they do not *need* men, there is no shame in pursuing relationships with them as long as it’s fulfilling and beneficial. This challenges the notions that female characters are either obsessed with men or fully independent and not seeking a relationship. Both Max and Regine, though having different approaches to their sexual escapades, they explore these relationships not as defining characteristics of themselves, but rather extensions of their personhood that which the audience is already fond.

Furthermore, this show was created by and for Black audiences. Not only are Black women shown on screen, but they are actively in control of their portrayal. This is an integral aspect as women of color in totality remain underrepresented in every aspect of television. Bowser’s ability to find success in this show, along with many others, proves that *Living Single* does hold some revolutionary aspects. Though the show avoids engaging with racism in a subversive way, it creates a space for Black

audiences to celebrate their identity and culture while seeing the trivial, yet humorous day-to-day interactions of the main characters. The final lines of the article asserts: "What really separates "Living Single" from previous television efforts is the fact all four are very different but still could be described as role models, demonstrating the diversity that Hollywood rarely has allowed Black actresses to show." Black characters created by white people are often stereotypical, placate to a white audience, or feel the pressure to be the perfect representation of Blackness on screen. By creating a show around multiple different women with a shared racial identity, viewers are able to create a new dominant ideology--one that focuses on the idiosyncrasies and trivial, yet integral aspects characterize the Black female experience. Though no representation is perfect, *Living Single* works to integrate Blackness, femaleness, and its intersections as important factors of dominant American ideology.

CONCLUSION

Living Single is a complex text that ultimately celebrates Blackness and female identity. Despite flaws in discussing systemic racial issues and interactions with queerness, the 90s sitcom's mere existence on a major network is nothing to overlook. Some viewers might have followed a dominant reading, recognizing the show as a pro-Black narrative that centers marginalized members and celebrates their success. Conversely, some viewers might have had an oppositional understanding, reading the show as overly palatable by simplifying the nuances of Black and queer life. Networks like Fox were, and still are, run primarily by white men and writers like Bowser are forced to cater to white fragility if it means getting the show on air. Both readings can be true at once, as the text pushes some boundaries but refrains from others. Ultimately, *Living Single* is not an entirely subversive text but

that does not negate its importance in creating television that positively portrays and celebrates Blackness.