

Considering Contemporary Television's Ideological Power

Isabel Molina-Guzman, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The past ten years of U.S. streaming and legacy comedic television is best characterized by its post-racial ideology, a colorblind ideology that depends on multicultural ensemble casting and the use of humor grounded in hipster racism defined as comedic narratives and dialogue that push the boundaries of social respectability. Post-racial programs came in to existence, declined or gained in audience popularity during a significant historical, cultural and political period for the United States (2007-2016) – the 2007 presidential campaign, eight-year presidency of Barack H. Obama and subsequent election of Donald J. Trump, a period I label the post-racial era of US produced television. Rather than argue post-racial TV productions moved beyond seeing race or using representational stereotypes, I propose the cultural conditions under which ethnic and racial minorities actors and characters have become visible in TV comedies are indebted to the post-racial belief that audiences have moved on from seeing racial difference and past racial discrimination – that TV's comedic producers, texts, and the audiences that watch the shows are now colorblind.

Colorblindness & Casting. The popular culture ideology of colorblindness is most apparent in theater and television casting practices. Similar to colorblindness within the political arena, the assumption of colorblind casting in television is that all actors compete for parts on an equal playing field based on the merits of their skills. As Kristin Warner (2017) documents, colorblind casting in television erases ongoing structural inequalities in the industry and contributes to making visual difference racially insignificant by relying on the development of characters de-contextualized from ethnic and racial specificity. The consequence of colorblind casting in TV is that it makes the representations of ethnic, racial and gender difference culturally, socially and politically irrelevant.

Post-racial TV Ideology. Most often post-racial programming depends on the minimal yet increased visibility of African American and Latina/o actors and characters in multicultural ensemble shows de-contextualized from specific experiences or identities. Television and film scholar Mary Beltran calls the use of this type of casting in cinema as “utopic multiculturalism” (2005, 59), a form of multiculturalism where producers use ethnic and racial minority actors as background to create a visual aura of authenticity rather than significant storylines foregrounding the experiences of ethnic and racial minorities. Producers of post-racial era TV comedies similarly make the ethnic and racial difference of the actor and characters culturally, socially and politically visible but usually only as comic background to the white leads and storylines of the show. At its most politically progressive multicultural ensemble comedies have the potential to be grounded in ethnic or racial social consciousness or what Warner terms “color consciousness.” Color conscious TV programs develop characters with ethnic and racial

cultural and experiential specificity and thereby more complexity, for instance CW's *Jane the Virgin* or ABC's *Black-ish*. In its most regressive form, the laughter surrounding ethnic and racial minority characters in post-racial era TV are grounded in what Catherine Squires terms "hipster racism." Often post-racial era TV comedies are both simultaneously progressive and regressive.

Hipster Racism. Hipster racism refers to the US publics' and cultural producers increased comfort with the use of language and humor that could be coded as racist or sexist or homophobic. It is referred to by a variety of other terms – modern racism, implied racism, covert racism. The use of racially-loaded language may be explicit, for instance, the increasing use of words like "nigga" for comedic effect. However, in comedies, especially network shows that are move heavily censored by network executives, hipster racism is often implied or inferred. Performance studies scholars Bernadette Calafell (2012) suggests inferential racism is a central component of the culture of civility in which white norms of behavior are grounded. Post-racial era comedy perpetuates the conditions of cultural civility, whiteness, and inequality through the use of multicultural casting and the scripted deployment of the comedy of hipster racism.

Post-Racial Ideological Legacy. Latina/o and African American actors and characters on comedic programming function as a form of "neoliberal multiculturalism" (Melamed 2011). Neoliberal multiculturalism manages the contradictions of ethnic and racial life in the United States by producing the appearance of equity while maintaining the devaluation and structural inequality of ethnic, racial and gender minority groups. By celebrating incremental steps in screen visibility, legacy and digital media leave ethnocentrism, racism and sexism within the entertainment industry and society largely unchallenged. Cultural representation becomes a visible sign of social progress contributing to the erasure of continuing social and economic barriers for ethnic and racial minorities in the United States. Regardless of platforms or the progressive or conservative messages embedded in the storylines and characters, post-racial television ideology reinforces the long-standing white heteronormative norms and values of comedic programming. The election of Donald Trump raises the social, cultural, and political stakes of televisions ideological drive.

References

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