

Contesting 'Ontological Blackness': An Examination of Racial Representation in *This is Us*

Nishtha Pandey

Abstract

The paper engages in an examination of the televisual representations of blackness as a spectrum of lived experiences rather than as a stable monolithic identity in the context of the African-American community in the United States. Taking the National Broadcasting Company's (NBC) show *This is Us* (2016-) as the primary text, the paper explores the notion of post-blackness as defined by Touré through the discourses on race that the show is premised on.

Keywords: Blackness; Mediatization; Post-blackness; Television; Visuality

The normalization of discourse depends on its re-iterability, especially on the bodies and subjectivities of those it dominates. The narratives that constitute the history of a particular space are shaped by the dominant discourse, which posits the agencies of power at the center while the marginalized are placed at the periphery. The normalization of dominant discourse and identities is systematized not only through the reiteration of the *presence* of the agencies holding power but also through the visible *absence* of peripheral voices. As the factors of production and representation are controlled by the dominant agencies, not only are marginalized narratives not presented in the sphere of visibility but are also appropriated by the dominant agencies. At the crux of this paper is a discussion on the politics of the representation of race on television in America. In terms of the discourse on race, the politics of visibility gain importance as racial distinctions have usually been discerned using the rhetoric of difference in color, which is rooted in visuality.

Much like other settler colonies, the United States of America has had contentious relationships between the various stakeholders in the racial debate. While the native Americans, the Hispanic populace and other mixed-race communities form an important part of the country's demographics, the white settler population has posited itself as the dominant agency, which propagates and regulates the discourse on race. The African-American

population finds itself at the other end of the power dynamic as they have been rendered as the most visible 'Other' by the white population due to the perceived differences in their racial attributes. As a result, the representation of African-Americans on American television has traditionally oscillated between two spectrums. On one hand, either there is a complete absence of African-American characters on otherwise successful shows, for example, *Friends* or *Seinfeld* which are otherwise set in a largely cosmopolitan and racially diverse New York or there is tokenism. On the other, the representation of black characters suffers from negative stereotypes like drug abuse, physical violence in order to propagate negro-phobia. Black characters are also made to routinely perform drag or cross-dress in order to emasculate the black man by ridiculing him to make him seem less threatening. This paper has two concomitant objectives. First, it seeks to examine the contentions with the manner of black representation as underlined above and discuss the resistance(s) to such stereotypes from the African American community. Second, it wishes to not only arrive at an understanding of the African American community as a political category in the American media discourse but also raise the question as to what it means to be black and explore the gamut of such an embodiment. The first two seasons of the American television drama *This is Us* (2016-) broadcast on National Broadcasting Company (NBC) serve as the site through which these standpoints shall be explored.

Television as a medium has the potential to be utilized as the site of negotiating with the quantity, quality and the perspective through which African-American representation has hitherto been undertaken. Due to its wide reach as a medium of mass dissemination cutting across class and race divisions, the television is a dominant source of information and entertainment for a majority of Americans. However, its mass appeal as well as accessibility renders it with an uncontrollable potential to affirm stereotypes related to the marginalized communities, in this case, the African-American community in the US. Thus, television has often been the medium through which stereotypes have been perpetrated even further in the minds of its viewers. This is unsurprising because the factors of production have been and continue to be controlled by the white population. Despite a gradual increase in quantity of African American portrayals on television, the quality of these portrayals have been dismaying. For years, stereotypical representations of African Americans on television have been criticized. It has been argued that Black images on television may cause viewers to conceive, alter and even reinforce their beliefs and opinions about African-Americans as an exposure to negative portrayals in media significantly influences the evaluation of African-Americans in general. This influence

is most often tied to the *cultivation theory* propounded by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in 1976, according to which, individuals who frequently watch television for longer hours begin to believe that they are living in a world similar to the fictional one on screen. (Gerbner and Gross, 176) Therefore, a person who watches numerous crime shows would believe that he/she is living in a world more dangerous than it actually is, largely in part because their sense of crime has heightened. Unfortunately, the media portrays African Americans acting out and behaving in unflattering ways; thus these stereotypes become even more believable. This leads to people of other races seeing these characteristics as defining African-Americans. Some of these stereotypes date back to the 1940s and 1950s, when African Americans had few roles, but they largely consisted of stereotypic portrayals of characters being lazy, simple, or holding domestic servant roles such as television shows *Beulah* and *Amos 'n Andy* depicted. Most of the characters would not even have a high school diploma and additionally, were viewed as coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Even in the 1960s, African Americans still received stereotypical roles that were created in order to amuse White viewers. As the Civil Rights Movement went underway, it became clear that minority characters were not being represented fairly or adequately on television, and discriminatory hiring policies were hand-in-glove with the parts written. It was noted that these portrayals played a large role in shaping the negative perception Whites acquired for minorities. Fortunately enough, after the civil rights movement, African Americans began getting more roles that didn't always depict them negatively as television shows *The Mod Squad* and *Julia* illustrated. However, even as they gradually began to receive more notable roles, stereotypical portrayals were still featured. Nonetheless, African Americans on television became more noticeable in later years. Shows like *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (1993-99), *The Wire* (2002-08), *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990-96) were affirmative and positive in their portrayal of Black characters. In the latter, the lead character Will Smith (played by the actor Will Smith) was black, a change from the usual 'special appearances'. In the later years, representations have been more substantial and positive, with a recent spurt in shows with and about black life and experiences, like *Black-ish* (2014-present), *Atlanta* (2016-present), *Empire* (2015-present), *Insecure* (2016-present).

NBC's *This is Us* is different from the above mentioned shows in that it entwines the trajectories of the white and black characters in a way that is impossible to overlook. So, while the show is not predominantly about racial relationships, race is a very pervasive aspect of the show. The series follows the lives of siblings Kevin, Kate, and Randall (known as the "Big Three"),

and their parents Jack and Rebecca Pearson. It takes place in the present and using flashbacks, various times in the past. Kevin and Kate are the two surviving members of a triplet pregnancy, born six weeks premature on Jack's 36th birthday in 1980; their brother is stillborn. Believing they were meant to have three children, Jack and Rebecca, who are white, decide to adopt Randall, a black child born the same day and brought to the same hospital after his biological father William abandoned him at a fire station. William grew up in Memphis with a single mother after his father passed away in war.

Early on in his life he showed a talent for music and writing and eventually joined a band alongside his cousin. His mother moved to Pittsburgh in order to make more money but became ill with cancer. William moved to Pittsburgh in order to help his mother and that's where he met Randall's biological mother, Laurel. After William's mother passes away, Laurel gets him into the drug world and he becomes addicted to heroin. Laurel passed away during childbirth, which is why William drops him off at the fire station. (S1 Ep 3 0:37-2:00).

Jack dies when his children are 17. The show opens with the now adult Randall approaching his biological father (William 'Shakespeare' Hill) after hiring an investigator to find him, in an attempt to chide him for abandoning him as a kid. However, he ends up bringing his father home to meet his children. This ends up being a major turning point in Randall's life as he now discovers that the void created due to the absence of his biological family and as a result, the absence of black role models in his life, has been bridged for the first time and the penetrating incompleteness regarding his own identity has been resolved to a large extent. This paper would examine events from Randall's life, specifically his relationship(s) with his adoptive family as well as his biological family to examine the various ways in which this show complicates the question: "What does it mean to be black?" as well as challenges the stereotypes of representation of the African American community as done in American television thus far. Before one proceeds, it is imperative to understand the complicated nature of the term 'Black' in discourse and lived experiences.

Historically, Western thought has had a tendency to conceptualise identity in terms of binaries between similar beings, of being manifesting in its own state, or emerging as its own mirror, rather than in terms of a mutual belonging to a common world. As the immediate consequence of this self-fictionalization and self-contemplation, Blackness and race have played multiple roles in the imaginations of European societies. (Mbembe, 1) By reducing the body to outward appearance, skin and color, Blackness and race have been made to seem interchangeable. According to Achille Mbembe,

there are three critical moments in the history of this process. With the Atlantic slave trade from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries, people from Africa were transformed into commodities owned by those who hated them, solely on the basis of appearance, and deprived of their own names, languages and agency. They were seen as the deplorable 'Other' and denied recognition as co-humans, yet remaining active (quasi-)subjects. With the birth of writing at the end of the eighteenth century, Blacks, taken for granted as 'being-taken-by-others', began leaving traces in language and demanded the status of full subjects. This was evident by the innumerable slave revolts, the battle for abolition of the slave trade and by the struggle for civil rights in the United States. This culminated in the dismantling of apartheid during the last decades of the twentieth century. The final moment- the early twenty-first century- is marked by the globalization of markets leading to neo-liberalism and neocolonialism.

In these conditions, the noun "Black" might seem more polemical than it is. By juxtaposing the connotations associated with the era of early capitalism with today's usage, the aim is to interrogate the fiction of unity that the term carries within it. This unified perception is largely the result of the white gaze, which perceives the 'other' as a monolith in order to deceive itself of its own unity. James Baldwin had suggested that it was difficult to define the black man in abstract as there always exists a dialectic of sight with the other. (Baldwin 84) The limitations of imposing a forced unity are visible as beyond ancestral links, there is little evidence of a unity between the black population of the United States, the Caribbean and Africa. Even on a phenomenological level, the term is coated with the deception that the West has woven, by clothing people of the African origin long before they were caught in structures of capitalism. (Mbembe 36) By dissemination and inculcation of stereotypes, this deceptive coating has come to stand in as a substitute for the life, work, language and being of the Black. Gradually, this coating, according to Mbembe, has transformed into a calcified shell, a second ontology that destroys its victim. For example, Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* deals with this wound and the conditions under which it can be healed. James Baldwin while comparing the wound to a poison asks about the effect it has on the dialectic between the perpetrator and the victim. The anti-colonial critique of the western idea of modernity drew largely on the very colonial myths and stereotypes that it sought to invert, as it took the existence of stereotypes of the cannibal or a fundamentally irrational and savage Black world for granted. This critique accepted the idea that the Black man's love of forms and rhythms was the product of this degeneration. This led to a noun turn into a concept, whereby "blackness" became the idiom via which people of African origin were supposed to identify

themselves and be interpellated as well as affirm their own power and genius.

But the malleability of this concept permits black people to shape it into tools to contest the various misconceptions about what blackness is or isn't. They have to share the dreaded epithet that bestows a monolithic identity and the resulting solidarity in derision even as they try to escape from traditional meanings of Blackness and trump the idea that a single gauge of oppression measures the full weight of their Black identities any longer, if it ever did in the first place. As stated by Michael Eric Dyson in his preface to Touré's book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness* that the undeniable need to fight oppression cannot overshadow the will to live and think blackness according to one's own prerogative. (Touré xiii) The objective of fighting for emancipation is the freedom to define Blackness as one sees fit. One cannot argue from an *a priori* Blackness or an 'ontological blackness'² as Victor Anderson calls it, a Blackness that is given and remains steady despite historical changes at the backdrop and the accompanying struggle. (Anderson 11) The notion that there is an innate 'blackness' that has to be believed by all black people is problematic because the interests and levels of relation between various black communities with their color and the associated lived experiences doesn't make them more or less black, unlike what is commonly projected. Hence, the term "post-black" is so suggestive, as it clearly doesn't signify the end of Blackness. Rather, it points to the end of the narrow, single notion of Blackness. Touré makes it clear that post-black does not mean "post-racial". Post-racial posits that race does not exist and suggests color blindness; it reflects a naive understanding of race in America. On the other hand, post-black connotes being rooted in but not restricted by Blackness. Touré emphasizes that post-black cannot be used as a replacement for 'black' or 'African-American', neither does it mean that some people are post-Black and some are not; it just means that in the contemporary day and age, one is in a post-Black era where identity options are limitless. Most concepts are metaphysical and have a confining aspect to them, but post-Black is not a box, it is an 'unbox' as it is open-ended and endlessly customizable. Post-blackness gives such a wide range to what it means to be Black and makes it so diffuse and unpredictable that blackness itself becomes indefinable. (Touré 12)

Mumia Abu Jamal, one of America's famous death row convicts said about blackness, "I've learned that it's meaning expands, as does time and space itself. That is to say, what it meant to me as a youth, as a member of the Black Panther Party, means completely different things today, for times have changed, and perhaps more importantly, consciousness has changed." (Touré 213) However, Reverend Jesse Jackson said that in the 1960s, Black

was synonymous with struggle as well as resistance at all levels of society. However, for him the present day generation is oblivious of its own inequality, as the fight is not about freedom now but about equality. He periodizes the freedom struggle in the USA into four stages. The first stage was the legal end of slavery. The second stage was the legal end to Jim Crowⁱⁱⁱ.

This was followed by access to the ballot. However, one could be emancipated, live in a desegregated society and have the right to vote, yet starve to death and foreclosure. Hence, when it came to the fourth stage- that of equality- one needed access to capital, industry, technology, deal flow and broadband. (Touré 214)

One would like to see this dichotomy of blackness as a unified political term and post-blackness as positing that blackness is not a stable monolith through the relationship that Randall Pearson shares with his biological father. Even though Randall is a very successful weather trader and lives with his wife Beth and two daughters in a predominantly white neighborhood in New Jersey, incidents of racial profiling are seen. When his biological father William is going out on a walk, because of his not so affluent clothing, a call is made to the police about a black man loitering by Randall's white neighbors. As a defiant William proceeds to call out the racial profiling he has just been subjected to, Randall steps in and talks to the police officer who is known to him. Additionally, he suggests to his father that he should buy some new (read "upper middle class") clothes, which his father does not like. Later, in the store, Randall confronts his father for his condescending gaze towards Randall because William allegedly judges Randall for not embracing his blackness completely and being privileged because he was brought up in a black family. Randall justifies that he is scrutinized every day for being black and that he has to choose his battles as there were way too many to fight. He states that just because he was brought up in a white household does not make him less black or his experiences less authentic and that he had to negotiate with his racial identity every day. (Season 1, ep 4) As Cornel West says, "When you really get at the Black normative gaze, what you find is that oftentimes the white supremacy inside of Black minds is so deep that the white normative gaze and the Black normative gaze are not that different." (Touré 29) Hence, the black gaze towards itself in Lacanian terms would be an oppressive and delusional tool used to give oneself a false sense of unity and solidarity, as it imposes the historical weight that has been attached to being black on generations that have not faced the associated racial oppression and struggle that the previous generations, like William's, has faced. This is the root cause of the tensions between Randall and his father, which are resolved

after this confrontation. As is seen in the show, it has been difficult for Randall to negotiate with his racial identity as a child especially considering the unusual circumstances he is in. Later, when Randall and his family take in a girl Déjà as their foster child, her mother Shauna reaches their house and there is a verbal altercation. The neighbors ask Randall if he needs them to call the police. It is seen that despite inhabiting the same neighborhood for years along with their predominantly white neighbors, racial profiling is intimately connected to class inequalities as both Shauna and William *appear* to be from an economically disadvantaged background and are hence, by extension, dangerous.

As Randall is growing up, he realizes that he is different. His mother Rebecca is very protective towards him and often holds him the dearest of the three kids. This is the reason why she approaches William and ensures that he doesn't ask for Randall. When his parents take him and his siblings to a community pool, he as an eight year old suggests a pool where there are black families too and goes off to play with some black kids his age. He further asks his mother if he does need sunscreen and his parents don't have an answer. In another incident, when he learns about genetic traits at school, he goes around rolling his tongue at unknown Black strangers to see if they could be his parents. He is very happy with his adoptive parents but still feels incomplete in his perception of himself. He lives in a predominantly white neighborhood in Pittsburgh and goes to the same public school as his siblings, but when his teachers tell his parents that he is a math prodigy and should be shifted to a better, private school, his parents are initially apprehensive as those schools will not have any black students and Randall won't have his siblings to protect him. Eventually, they do send him to a private school.

Jack and Rebecca are not race-blind. They try their best to ensure that Randall assimilates to the nuances of his racial uniqueness and heritage and is able to grapple with prejudices targeted at him. A particular incident is when Rebecca's mother comes to visit. Randall looks for her love and approval but she disregards his attention and gifts him a basketball every time she visits because she tells Randall that "We all need to find that one thing that we are good at", subscribing to the stereotype that black people are good athletes, by extension, they are intellectually inferior. This is the reason she asks her daughter as to why Randall has to be the one to be sent to a private school. Rebecca confronts her own mother and says that while she thought Randall was not welcomed by her mother because he was adopted, she now realized that it was because he was Black. She outrightly calls her mother a racist and then proceeds with Jack to give Randall a talk about how subtle racism works, by giving an example from her own family. When Randall is

about to graduate from his school, Jack wants to send him to Harvard University. But during campus tours, Randall suggests that he wants to visit Howard University, which is one of America's premier HBCU (Historically Black College and Universities) because he wants to be around people who might share the same interests. He finds himself more at ease at Howard during the campus tour.

The part of Pittsburgh where Randall's father lived is a completely different story altogether from the part where Randall grew up in. The rooms are small and measly, the neighborhood is predominantly black and the building where William lives is ill equipped and replete with safety violations and health hazards. Most people in this building were drug addicts and it wasn't a particularly safe neighborhood. After William's death, when Randall revisits that place, he decides to buy the building with Beth and renovate it, to improve the conditions of living of the renters and to alleviate their misery. His brother Kevin who is a successful actor also helps with demolition of unnecessary walls and pest control and it is a rare site to see on television—a rich white actor and his rich black brother voluntarily getting their 'hands dirty' for people who need better facilities.

Even in his interaction with other people and his own father, Randall admits many times that his lived experience is predominantly white and there are many aspects of blackness that he is unaware of and doesn't relate to. For example, even though his biological father and grandfather were skilled instrumentalists and singers, Randall does not have a musical bone in his body and his attempts to acclimatize are huge failures. He is very astonished to see that his father was such a skilled poet as he himself has always been very empirical, sometimes exceedingly so.

The biggest example of prejudice is evident in the country's judicial system, which privileges the white citizens and despite it being the twenty first century, laws are still formulated with the gaze of suspicion at the African-American population. Déjà's biological mother Shauna is denied custody of her daughter solely because she has had some drinks. Her subsequent arrest is also on flimsy grounds. An exception to this is William's arrest for drug possession, where the white judge openly regrets the decisions he has taken because of the inequitable laws, and makes an exception for him because he sees potential in him. This is the only example of the justice system aiming to be corrective rather than punitive. Another example of the black gaze is seen during Randall's adoption, when the Black judge thinks that he is best suited in a black house, but after an emotional appeal by Rebecca, recuses himself and ensures that Randall is adopted by Jack and Rebecca.

As we have clearly seen, being black is clearly political for William, as he has seen segregation and has participated in protests related to busing but for Randall, apart from it being strictly political, it is also more complicated as he chooses to imbibe certain aspects associated with being Black while letting the others be. As would be evident during the trip he takes with William to Memphis, Randall would discover for the first time so many aspects to Blackness that he had never seen, as he grew up in a white household: His father as a jazz musician, in a black neighborhood. He goes ecstatic when he discovers that much like other black people, he has a large number of cousins and second cousins. Randall in this case is clearly post-black, as he has grappled with his racial identity but has decided that it is not his only defining characteristic. Vera Grant states that unless marginal and peripheral identities in the spectrum of blackness take center stage and the dominant notions of blackness are de-centered to achieve some parity with the dispersed and the marginal, a progressive, accurate and honest vision of Blackness cannot be achieved. (Touré 210)

The dialectic of sight that perpetuates blackness as a monolithic ontological condition of the African-American community rather than as a lived experience is complicated in the representation of blackness in media that depends on sight, like cinema and television. Mediation or mediatization brings to the dialectic of sight various apparatuses like lighting and camera that usually play an important role in depicting characters in a particular light. Unlike the novel, where the reader may have to depend solely on descriptions by the narrator or characters that interpellate sight to understand the racial differences, in television and other media evoking visuality, the viewer 'sees' racial distinctions without any supplementary descriptions. Further, the gaze of the camera precedes the gaze of the viewer. The gaze of the camera is distinct as it may condition the gaze of the viewer by what it focuses on. For example, in the show, the scenes depicting William often zoom in on his face as the camera carefully moves to show him from top to bottom, thereby giving the impression that he is being gazed at by the viewer. His race, especially due to the oppression he faced and his abandonment of his son who is taken in by the Pearson family, is the pivot through which he understands his lived experiences. However, in scenes depicting the Jackson family, the camera is zoomed out, thereby giving the impression of inclusion and assimilation. Even scenes depicting Randall and his own family are zoomed out as Randall recognizes that blackness play an important role in the construction of his identity but is not the only determining factor behind it.

To be post-black would entail the idea of having the freedom to explore the world through a particular Black aesthetic lens without the compulsion of

always have to feel politically Black. *This is Us* presents enough distinctions between blackness as a political category and as a lived experience. Thus, I would like to conclude by stating that *This is Us* not only breaks away from stereotypical representations of African American community by presenting a nuanced depiction of Black characters but also demonstrates quite successfully that there is blackness is not a monolith, it is a spectrum of being or living and that it is necessary to move beyond the notion of ontological blackness.

Notes:

¹ The word ‘interpellation’ has been used in the context of ideological interpellation, as first propounded by the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971).

² The phrase ‘ontological blackness’ has been used by Anderson in his book *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (1995) as representing a reification of race in contemporary African American cultural theory which essentially see blackness as a unified category rather than from an intersectional framework.

³ ‘Jim Crow’ refers to a set of state and local laws enacted in the late 19th century in the United States of America that mandated racial segregation in public spaces as a part of the Supreme Court’s “separate but equal” policy. They continued to be enforced until 1965.

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