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In Defence of #blackAF's Celebration of Mediocrity

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Abstract

This article explores how television and film writer-producer Kenya Barris' Netflix series #blackAF disturbs and seemingly upends Black millennial woke cultural assumptions about the good life. This, I contend - not discounting the valid classist and colourist critiques of the show - is the animus for Black millennial discontent with #blackAF. Specifically, I reveal the hashtags #blackexcellence and #supporteverythingblack to be ideological blankets covering the unfortunate reality of everyday Black life. These hashtags, which do the ideological work of covering over reality, are made unstable and incoherent by #blackAF's apotheosizing of mediocrity as a grand cultural accomplishment. In one fell swoop #blackAF manages to give the death knell to Cosbyian respectability politics, which have hitherto been operating in the guise of the hashtag #blackexcellence.

Keywords

Black studies, cultural studies, philosophy, semiotics, sociology

Whenever we stand on principle...in this generation, it becomes hashtag, and it doesn't stick to the reality.

\- *Craig Hodges*[1]

I made myself the poet of the world. The white man had found a poetry in which there was nothing poetic. The soul of the white man was corrupted, and, as I was told by a friend who was a teacher in the United States, "The presence of the Negro beside the whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance." At last, I had been recognized, I was no longer a zero.

\- *Frantz Fanon,*
Black Skin White Masks[2]

Kenya Barris, the creator of the acclaimed ABC sitcom, *Black-ish* (and its spin-offs, *Grown-ish* and *Mixed-ish*) released a Netflix series in the spring of 2020 entitled *#blackAF*. The show is about a successful Black father and husband trying to navigate sharp arrows thrown at him by his white contemporaries in the film industry. The show is a semi-autobiographical portrayal of Barris' life. It does a fantastic job at blurring the lines between what parts of the show are dramatized and which parts are real. This metonymic rhetorical approach creates a kaleidoscopic effect within the show's discourse that, to the viewer's dismay, tends to keep the audience out of kilter.

Much of the show is about Kenya dealing with the existential crisis of his self-worth and questions of Black authenticity after engaging in psychologically dangerous encounters with his white peers. His self-loathing, insatiable neediness, creative genius, and flawed counterfactual reasoning are showcased through interviews conducted by his second eldest daughter, Drea, who is filming a documentary for her N.Y.U. film school application. Parts of the series are shown through Drea's lens, adopting a mockumentary approach to storytelling. The entire series features his six children and biracial wife Joya, played by Rashida Jones - who is also a writer and producer on the show. #blackAF has received visceral reactions from the Black Twitterati, which regularly highlight the classist and colourist undertones of the show.[3] Yet, despite these, admittedly valid, criticisms, I deeply enjoyed *#blackAF* for purposes that are not easily apparent. Allow me to explain.

Theorizing with Kenya

#blackAF seems to upend woke culture in ways that leave many aspirant Black millennials uncomfortable. The signifying hashtags #blackexcellence and #supporteverythingblack are revealed to be veils covering the unfortunate social, economic, and political reality of everyday Black life (Petski, 2019, para. 1).[4] The ideological power of hashtags (which often get misidentified as mere hashtags) is summarily unravelled by the cool embrace of Black mediocrity by the ensemble cast. The lacunas that are displayed thereafter

[1] (Hodges, 2021, 8:44-8:51)
[2] (Fanon, 2008, p. 98)
[3] For instance, Essence magazine covered Barris' social media response to early critiques of his casting decisions as being colourist. Barris responds: "Regarding the casting of his Black Excellence actors, these kids look like my kids. My very Black REAL kids & they face discrimination every day from others outside our culture and I don't want them to also see it from US" (Essence, 2019, para. 8).
[4] After I had completed the second draft of this article it was pointed out to me by my colleague Firrisaa Abdulkarim that the original name of #blackAF was #blackexcellence. Further substantiating my argument that #blackAF is a pointed critique of the black excellence ethos (Petski, 2019, para. 1).

require one to be a skilled leaper, which Kenya himself is not. Kenya comfortably embraces the mania that comes from being freshly set loose from the straitjacket tightly wrapped around practitioners of Cosbyian respectability politics. Early in the show Barris admits to being everything he is and is not, fully embracing corporate mediocrity, cupidity, un-charitableness, and the rancid dislike of his children. This is a refreshing take. He is everything his childhood hero Heathcliffe Huxtable was not. After Cosby's shameful downfall, this is the American dad we are left with, and he has a message for all of us looking for Black redemption in the messianic father figure: look elsewhere or be doomed to repeat the last 40 years of hell again. In this way, he laughs in the face of a young Bill Cosby in the guise of a Dwayne Wayne (one of the lead characters in *The Cosby Show* spin-off - *A Different World*). This relational dynamic is exemplified when the latter self-righteously says: "it's not enough for you to be equal, you have to be better, we have to be better" (see Miller, 1991, 18:53-18:58). If only Dwayne Wayne knew that Black mediocrity would suffice to get us over the mountain cliff.

Cosby is always the ghosted dad in the room (Nelson & Poitier, 1990). Displaying a penchant for waxing poetic and ranting on the virtues of uplifting others, personal responsibility, and bootstrapping to the Black-underclasses (which, for him, consisted of deadbeat fathers, single mothers, and delinquent children), Cosby spoke with a scathing paternalism that even the newly-minted and firmly established lumpen Black-bourgeoisie would find detestable - although, in private, they would applaud his audacity and apply his vision of Black excellence to their lives. Nevertheless, and relatedly, the not-quite conscious need to break with the singularizing ideology of #blackexcellence embodied in the never not-not-there father figure of Cosby is challenged in #blackAF.

This is brought to the fore in Episode 6 when a series of Kenya's problematic tweets whizz by the screen with dizzying effect. Freezeframing the show with the pause button, I am greeted with a deeply parodic tweet (from when the first allegations of rape were levied against Cosby in the media) that reads: "I Stand with Cosby!!! #BlackExcellence #YouWillAlwaysBeMyDad #LeonardPart6" (see Barris, 2020, 13:34). Truth is entirely relative in the show and self-abnegation is rampant. Indeed, the truth is subjective to a fault - and pleasing untruths pass for reality. The family (especially the children) have come to learn what Thrasymachus, in Plato's Republic, learned so long ago while debating Socrates: that truth and justice is whatever the strong and wealthy say it is (Plato, 2005, p. 16).

The mediocrity that the show celebrates is one steeped in the understanding, like its predecessor *Modern Family* - whose creator, Steven Levitan, appears as Kenya's antagonist in Episode 1 - that their George Jeffersonian arrival is merely the mimicking of the unfettered rapaciousness and concerted dim-wittedness of which white privilege can afford. This is where Kenya hits the bottom of the proverbial lacuna. His need for recognition and acceptance by his white contemporaries (whereby the Emmy Award which alludes him drives him up the lacuna's wall) culminates into a self-incinerating 'ressentiment'. Every action thereafter is a reaction. The entire show is essentially based around the audience voyeuristically watching him tragically attempt to climb out of a hole he has not dug - and he knows this. Hence, why *damn* near every episode is entitled, "...because of slavery...".

Way Beyond Belief

#blackAF seems to exemplify Friedrich Nietzsche's ressentiment in toto. The show employs the idea that "assigning blame...is all the have-nots seem willing and able to do...even under conditions of the most ancient and total form of domination: slavery" (Sexton, 2019, p. 7). Thus, we are caught in the theatre of expression that pegs moralizing as its main act. We stand still, solemn, and wax poetic on soapboxes that do not make possible the ability to see outside the lacuna we have fallen into. We lack the will to venture out and create new ideological formulations that are able to will us into action against political antagonists that have lulled us to sleep with the "cool language of bipartisanship, technocratic crisis management, evidence-based practices, and, above all, viability" (p. 4).

This unwillingness to create space to think of and for oneself and formulate a stratagem or clear-

eyed analysis of the situation that puts a premium on the "ethics of truth over the morality of values" (Sexton, 2019, p. 14), makes Kenya, and we who identify with this all-too-human failure of the courage to-be, slimy in the most Sartrean sense imaginable (Gordon, 1995, p. 38).[5] To put it in Jean Paul Sartre's (1993) words, the slimy individual "is a sly solidity and complicity of all its leech-like parts, a vage, soft effort made by each to individualize itself, followed by a falling back and flattening out that is emptied of the individual, sucked in on all sides by the substance" (p. 778). [6]

In Althusserian fashion, Kenya is hyper-aware of how the mechanisms that produce his subjectivity - society's reproductive forces, which he detests - creates an irremediable interpellation in him from without - an interpellation that alienates its subject from its alienation. Simply put, he cannot be comfortable in his discomfort. Nothing will suffice to give him a healthy dose of external-inculcated repression to null his neurosis and self-lacerating memories to rest for a while. Such an ability, which he lacks, could have enabled him to experience a noble type of forgetting, an almost extinct and aristocratic type of forgetting, that would enable Kenya to move towards more original and creative ways of thinking and acting in the world. This, in turn, would have reduced his psychological need to have to authenticate himself in front of the Steve Levitan's of the world by way of mimesis/imitation of those who do not suffer the anxieties brought on by imposter syndrome.

The scopic maze Kenya and his family navigate through Drea's documentary film project creates a show within a show. This makeshift hall of mirrors flashes memories and not images. This is the case because, as mentioned before, Kenya cannot healthily repress the moments of interpellation that haunt him. The feverish remembrance of the past projects onto the future, making the future a 'Pastime Paradise' (Wonder, 1976, 0:37-0:47).[7] This interpellation is not the denial of presence by the white to the Black but rather a hyper-visualization that freezes the Black. It freezes us in the way Dante Alighieri's hell freezes its occupants from the lower circles in the early Renaissance book *Inferno*. This is ironic because hyper-visualization is a process that affixes one to the gaze of the other, as if to scorch the viewed upon with a flame. Such an isolating experience pushes the subject into a figurative and literal isolation - a purgatory-like state of being that the subject is thrusted into and, oddly enough, granted a freedom they would otherwise not experience in the company, or face, of the sadistic other (Grieco & Manders, 1999; Dean, 2021).[8-9]

The decidedly ironic and parodic features of the show, which are symptomatic of the liberal progressivism of our age, forecloses any real calls to action from taking place. The show's cynicism,

[5] Jean Paul Sartre is read through the prism of Lewis R. Gordon's Black existential-phenomenological text *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*. When lacking the moral fortitude to stand for one's beliefs, as Gordon remarks, "Even the body at rest can be in bad faith. Such a body sinks into its facticity; it drowns itself in a "slimy" form of existence" (Gordon, 1995, p. 38).

[6] One may infer from the symbolic death of the messianic Black patriarch (Barris giving us the coup de grace), a remnant of the reconstruction era, that a space in time is now being made for the Black maternal figure to return, but her return is not immanent. This fact peeve's Black millennials to no end. Hence why the barrage of colourist critiques levied at the show's choice of multiracial cast members, namely Rashida Jones, rang so loudly at the outset of the show's release (Essence, 2019, para. 8). When will the Black maternal return as the not-mammy figure? When will she be present on the screen in the fullness of her being and in the full display of the innumerable complexities of her psychic life? Where she no longer is typified by one-dimensional tropes and stereotypes. Barris clears the land for this type of inventing and self-creation to occur. Yet, he is more tiller than planter. Hence, his genius for making space is not redoubled in the ability to generate new ideas. #blackAF is a pastiche. Its knack for self-deprecating humour is more Larry David than Keenan Ivory Wayans.

[7] Stevie Wonder's classic *Pastime Paradise* accurately expresses this dastardly sentimentality. He sings: "They've been wasting most their time, Glorifying days long gone behind, They've been wasting most their days, In remembrance of ignorance oldest praise" (Wonder, 1976).

[8] Michael Jordan's biographer Bob Greene states in the *ESPN SportsCentury: Michael Jordan* documentary, aired in 2003, that Jordan would describe this moment of being hyper-visualized as one when the eyes staring back would burn his skin with almost acidic acuity. It is for this reason that Jordan would only feel free in the icy isolation of his opulent hotel suite (Grieco & Manders, 1999).

[9] In an Instagram tribute to his friend, the rap superstar DMX, music producer and businessman, Swizz Beats, says a similar, yet even more tragic, truth: "He was in so much pain, that he would go to jail to have his freedom. He would go to jail to escape his pain" (Dean, 2021),

like its liberal-comedic contemporaries, *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah, or *SNL*, is as politically debilitating as it is informative. These shows are driven to poke holes in the logics and positions of conservatives and alt-right bigots, pointing and laughing at the scientifically unfounded and delirious beliefs of middle-aged American racists and, occasionally, colourblind-woke liberals of supposed good intent (read ecclesiastes). Hence, in the fashion of the Sartrean slime, these shows will never tell you what they believe in or what they stand for.

This reluctance to avow any belief may stem from the fact that such shows or comedic musings do not believe in anything outside of what analytical guidance, forecasts, and polls tell them to believe. This deep dive into the steely underworld of unabating enlightenment rationality is a deeply unreasonable deepfake that the Black cannot depend on. In other words, this progressivist-liberal ethos is not what it purports itself to be, nor does it do what one thinks it will, namely, to organize and meaningfully strategize. This is so, because, as Simon Critchley puts forward, belief (albeit distorted truth) stirs the animus of a people of similar affliction (but not completely equivalential afflictions) to take political action (Fanon, 2008, p. 120; also see Critchley, 2009)[10]

Yet still, Kenya ascribes to a sort of genealogical materialist analysis that Cornel West would be proud of. Such analysis treats Black history with the nuance and cultural sophistication it deserves, not merely couching it in economistic or politicized terms. However, the conclusions derived from Kenya's analysis are doused in cynicism and bereft of the engaging spirit of hoping against hope, thereby lacking in the passion of the Black prophetic tradition, the kind that Cornel West carries (West, 2008, p. 236).[11] It could be argued that West's hermeneutic baggage produces the conditions for an edifying political consciousness that extends beyond the empty identitarian based politics of our age. Such pessimism of the will and optimism of the intellect - to invert the famous Gramscian notion - leads to what Frank Wilderson would call the "politics of culture" rather than a desired "culture of politics" (Wilderson, 2010 p. 26).[12]

A culture of politics transforms the matrix of violence that positions the white, the Black, the racialized, and the Indigenous subject into an edified relational politics not keyed to the aforementioned paradigm of violence foundational to Euro-American modernity. On the contrary, a politics of culture works towards social progress within the confines of Euro-American modernity's matrices of power. This maddening arrangement is oxymoronic, to say the least. It is Sisyphean, in that one progresses, to only have to push the rock up the proverbial lacuna's walls within a generation's time. Media outlets such as *Buzzfeed* and radio shows like *The Breakfast Club* are perfect examples of the politics of culture. Their modus operandi is to offer empty criticisms from within Empire's accepted hegemonic cultural codes; this

[10] Yet belief brings about meaningful action, not merely unthought reaction, with, of course, the first order of patience. Frantz Fanon describes the Black psycho-existential situation thusly: "If I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say that I am one who waits." We are, in essence, the patient ones. Lastly, the ability to meaningfully organize and strategize happens when one ardently believes in the emancipatory potential of a political project. And it is patience that enables one to see that political project through. This feat cannot be accomplished through the milquetoast and narcissitically self-reflexive disposition of liberal-progressivist politics (Fanon, 2008, p. 120).

[11] Cornel West elaborates on this new philosophical methodology in his 1993 book 'Keeping Faith', stating: "My perspective can be characterized as a genealogical materialist analysis, that is, an analysis that replaces Marxist conceptions of history with Nietzschean notions of genealogy, yet preserves the materiality of multifaceted structured social practices. My understanding of genealogy derives neither from mere deconstructions of duplicitous and deceptive character of rhetorical strategies of logocentric discourses, nor from simple investigations into the operations of power of such discourses. Unlike Derrida and de Man, genealogical materialism does not rest content with a horizon of language. In contrast to Foucault and Said, I take the challenge of historical materialism with great seriousness" (West, 2008, p. 236).

[12] Wilderson (2010) states: "Rather than privilege a politics of culture(s)—that is, rather than examine and accept the cultural gestures and declarations which the three groups [,(the white, Black and Native),] under examination make about themselves—I privilege a culture of politics: in other words, what I am concerned with is how white film, Black film, and Red film articulate and disavow the matrix of violence which constructs the three essential positions [,(the Settler, Slave and Native),] which in turn structure U.S. antagonisms" (p. 26).

invariably buttresses the very hegemonic structures they seek to critique and, presumably, transcend. This may well be the case because 'wokeness' has become so profitable and formulaic for entrenched systems of cultural production, and because cultural production today is more about inane content creation than edified storytelling. In contrast, the 'culture of politics' would be best exemplified in movements like Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa and the Movement for Black Lives in Ferguson, Missouri in the late 2010s.

Nevertheless, Barris takes to heart the misrecognition he receives from contemporaries like Steve Levitan and cultural establishments like the Emmy Awards. In these instances, #blackAF is clearly operating within the hegemonic cultural codes of Euro-American modernity. Hence, the show, without equivocation, embraces a politics of culture as its frame of socio-ontological reference. Tyler Perry seems an odd figure to point this out to Barris. Barris approaches Perry for counsel. He admits that he "really cares about what white people think...I care what everybody thinks" (see Barris, 2020, 30:07-30:12). Perry is the picture of self-assuredness. The confident and self-starting side of the Janus-faced coin. When coaching Barris, Perry dismisses the legitimacy of mainstream cultural hegemons and tastemakers like the Oscars and Rotten Tomatoes. He tells Kenya: "I super-serve my niche. We speak a language, we're talking, we know each other, we get it. There's a lot of times I see shit that wins Oscars and I be like, 'what is this shit?'...I'm talking to us. That's why millions of people are watching my shows every week" (see Barris, 2020, 32:07-32:56).

One Last Dance with my Father

In Barris' *Black-ish* we see a 'new Black' familial "struggle with racial identity in the post-integration era" (Weheliye, 2014, para. 5). In the show we see an "upper middle-class black couple that is struggling to keep cultural influences for children" (Ibid.). *Black-ish* was veritably *The Cosby Show* 2.0 (with its equivalent spin off to *The Cosby Show*'s *A Different World*, *Grown-ish*), not so much in substance and content, but in form. Yet in #blackAF, the identity crisis is not completely a family affair. Kenya and Joya are out of touch but not out of step. They still have a working notion of what it is to be Black within the facticity of the Euro-American horizon. It is their four youngest children, excluding their two eldest daughters, who are 'the new Blacks' on the scene a la Raven Simone and Pharrell Williams (Hunt, 2014, para. 8-9).[13]

Joya witnesses this out of steppedness when she observes her two sons dancing horribly off beat. She takes this to signify that they are out of touch with their Blackness. When Joya interrogates Izzy, the third eldest daughter, we come to learn that, yes, indeed, Izzy as well as her two younger brothers see, rather dispassionately, themselves as existing beyond the identifiers of Black and African-American. This is the classic 'new Black' situation where one attempts to overcome the factical points of their existence - namely their body - by transcending their embodied Blackness. Joya subsequently convinces Kenya to organize a family BBQ with his 'Black' Inglewood family. Of course, this is a reactionary impulse that is as comedic as it is tragic.

Overworn stereotypes and tropes are employed in the BBQ episode, Episode 5 of the series. It gives the viewer the sense that the Barris family is knowingly mimicking and mocking what the white does when they feel they "have become too

[13] In 2014, Black Twitterati was in uproar over former Cosby Show star Raven Symone's infamous refusal to claim signifiers such as African-American or Gay in her interview with Oprah Winfrey. Around the same time the Raven interview with Oprah was aired, Pharrell Williams (who coined 'new black' as a term of identification) did an interview with Ebony magazine that had his Cosbyian fatherly ethos on full display. He remarks on the fatal killing of Michael Brown, saying, "it looked very bully-ish; that in itself I had a problem with. Not with the kid, but with whatever happened in his life for him to arrive at a place where that behaviour is OK. Why aren't we talking about that?" with the Ebony interviewer noting, "You can almost hear the gnashing of Bill Cosby's teeth"; with Pharrell responding back, "And I agree with him. When Cosby said it back then, I understood; I got it. Listen, we have to look at ourselves and take action for ourselves [..] he portrayed a doctor on The Cosby Show and had us all wearing Coogi sweaters" (Hunt, 2014, para. 8-9).

mechanized" by Western modernity's mechanistic rigidities; *'slumming it up'* for a short while with the Black, or the native, in order to get that good 'ol' feelin' back (Fanon, 2008, p. 98); to get back in touch with the inner child from their primordial past. The white cunningly uses these liminal spaces on the Black side of town for the purposes of escape. Contrastingly, the Black uses these spaces for self-re-creation and inspiration. The noted difference here is that the Barris family has brought the party to their quarters and not to the *'hood'*, a faux pas in the Manichaean black and white world they live in. Another misstep for the nouveau riche Black family on the block.

Lastly, although #blackAF incinerates the Cosbyian Black fatherly logos in one fell swoop, Kenya unknowingly falls into the father-brother socio-cultural archetypal role (Marriott, 2000).[14] In a way, he is vying for the same attention and recognition his children are via competition amongst each other. He and his wife Joya even attend the same parties and take the same drugs as their college freshmen daughter. The couple, as Nas would rap about in his classic *Stillmatic* album, are stuck in their second childhoods, in arrested development. Nevertheless, he is the father-brother that so eagerly wants to give an inheritance (not just financially - but also, for example, his love for film and writing) to his children, but cannot because the psycho-social Oedipal arrangements of Euro-American society will not give said right to a father-brother who himself is yearning for recognition and acceptance; an inheritance - approval - from a civilization that lords over him like the father-tyrant of our mythic and historical past (Marriott, 2000, p. 113). Still, Kenya's constant failures endear him to us. For we too are destined to fail an innumerable amount of times before we succeed. But what is failure to those who have yet to enlist or to enrol in the game of life and its many tests?

Regardless, the show upends woke culture with its satirical takes. The direct consequence of the show's biting cynicism and slacker ethos is the apotheosizing of mediocrity as a grand cultural accomplishment and as a marker of achieving the American dream and its concomitant material acquisitions. In this way, the show shares more in common with sitcoms such as *Modern Family* and *Arrested Development* than with the *Cosby Show* or Barris' own *Black-ish*. #blackAF is in effect the wholesale dismissal of the Cosbian motto of having to be better than equal to attain success. Here, Cosby's left-behind children, the 'wayward' and all-to-fragile millennials, are left to feel dismayed and disillusioned (Markowitz, 2019, p. xv).[15] The signifying hashtags #blackexcellence and #supporteverythingblack are nothing but intramural Du Boisian veils covering over the miserable social, economic, and political reality of Black everyday life. Their ideological power (which gets misidentified as mere hashtags) is summarily unravelled by Barris' all-encompassing embrace of Black mediocrity.

[14] This idea of father-brother comes from a chapter entitled *Father Stories* in David Marriott's text *On Black Men* (Marriott, 2000).

[15] Here I am generalizing Daniel Markovitz's specified explanation for the fragile nature of the elite millennial's psychological constitution to apply to all millennials, and in particular, aspirational monied Black millennials. He states in his book *The Meritocracy Trap*: "Elite millennials can be precious and fragile, but not in the manner of special snowflakes that derisive polemics describe. They do not melt or wilt at every challenge to their privilege, so much as shatter under the intense competitive pressures to achieve that dominate their lives. They are neither dissolute nor decadent, but rather tense and exhausted" (Markovitz, 2019, p xv).

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