

Turning Racism on it's Head: Multicultural Readings of *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me*

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*In his 1995 book Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness," Herman Gray outlines what he calls the "multiculturalist" approach to representing minority groups on television. Gray argues that this approach avoids the pitfalls of assimilationism by emphasizing the differences between ethnic communities and mainstream society. Gray adds that this approach also avoids the problem of essentializing cultural identity by emphasizing the differences within ethnic communities. The multiculturalist discourse resolves many of the problems associated with media representations, therefore, by acknowledging the existence of cultural differences while simultaneously challenging normative conceptions of these differences. Sunjay Mathuria's analysis of *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me* shows how these television programs exemplify Gray's "multiculturalist" approach. Not only do these programs challenge normative conceptions of difference, but they also emphasize the diversity present within ethnic communities. Mathuria's essay thus effectively shows how the experience of otherness can be recognized, critiqued and commented on through televisual texts.*

- Dr. Anthony Enns

In *Politics of Representation in Network Television*, Herman Gray outlines the different ways television series approach race and ethnicity and classifies them into three discourses: assimilation and invisibility, pluralist, and multiculturalist. According to Gray, pluralist television allows for explicit representation of "blackness." This "blackness," however, is monolithic and homogenous as it is regulated through a normative discourse that eradicates historical context and issues such as social inequality (Gray 88). Conversely, multicultural television examines the interiorities and subjectivities of African-Americans and actively engages with cultural differences within a community or between communities (Gray 89). Although Gray primarily focuses on African-American sitcoms, his definitions of pluralist and multicultural representations can be applied to the study of the BBC sketch comedies, *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me*. Both series confront mainstream stereotypes of Black Britons and British Asians by overtly acknowledging and critiquing them. While pluralist representations do not acknowledge subordination and racism, *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me* explicitly challenge dominant narratives through the pattern of reversal. By doing so, *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me* negotiate their own normative spaces and offer perspectives from Black and Asian communities. Black and Asian characters interact with one another, engaging with their differences and creating a space in which the two cultures can fuse together. By locating the sketches within Black and Asian perspectives, *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me* challenge pluralist representations and exemplify Gray's theory of multicultural television.

Much of the comedy of *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me* derives from the reversal of Black and Asian stereotypes in Britain: "[The programs] rely on the comic strategies of exaggeration and reversal in order to draw attention to stereotypes in a critical way" (Bignell 221). The sketches challenge pluralist representations by confronting and interrogating implicitly racist stereotypes found in dominant British discourse. One sketch in *Goodness Gracious Me* parodies the Friday night tradition among young English Brits of getting drunk at a pub and then

eating at an Indian restaurant (Emig 178). The sketch, called "Going for An English," features a group of young inebriated Asians at a "traditional" English restaurant (Emig 178). They are rude to the waiter, mispronounce his name (James as "Jam-es") and challenge each other to eat the most "exotic" food: "What's the blandest thing on the menu?" The sketch plays off the tastelessness of English food, reversing the stereotype of the spiciness of South Asian cuisine. When Nina Wadia's character considers ordering a chicken curry, the others immediately berate her: "You've got to have something English. No spices shises." Wadia then says that English food "blocks" her up and that she would not be able to "go to the toilet for a week." Sanjeev Bhaskar's character then counters with: "That's the whole point of having an English."

In the chapter, "Television and Race in Britain," Jonathan Bignell notes the sketch "draws attention to the ways in which some British people abuse the staff of Indian curry restaurants and challenge each other to consume the hottest dishes" (Bignell 221). As exemplified in this skit, *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me* reverse the White British perspective in order to delineate mainstream stereotypes of Black and Asian Britons, such as complicated "foreign" names like "Jam-es", and the exoticness of Indian food. Thus, the "hegemonic gaze of whiteness" that Gray attributes to assimilationist and pluralist representations is absent in this sketch. It further trivializes the normative order of a dominant White British perspective by locating Asian culture "at the center of its social and cultural universe" (Gray 90). As Gray notes with *The Cosby Show*, multicultural television not only explores the interiors of African- American lives, but the shows are also authored by African-Americans (Gray 89). The writers of *Goodness Gracious Me*, Anil Gupta and Meera Syal, provide their own perspectives of how they experience Britain by deconstructing the "going for an Indian" ritual that they would be excluded from. Through the pattern of reversal, *Goodness Gracious Me* opposes a pluralist reading and instead exhibits more characteristics of a multiculturalist structure, such as recognizing racial undertones of stereotypes through Asian characters.

The diversity in *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me* is primarily represented by Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities. These representations are woven into many of the sketches and demonstrate Gray's idea of multicultural television (Gray 90). As opposed to pluralist television that contains diversity within a normative discourse, and disregards individual and subjective experiences, multiculturalist shows offer various personal positions and "engage cultural politics of differences" (Gray 90). As a result, the communities are represented not as monolithic but as interactive and dynamic.

In *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me*, the characters represent a wide spectrum of subject positions in their own communities. While the Aunties in *Goodness Gracious Me* view their Asian descent and Indian background as being relatively conservative, the "Rass Malai" boys view their Asian-ness as more liberal and interactive with mainstream British culture. Characters of different ethnicities also interact in ways that complicate clearly defined black and white binaries in assimilationist and pluralist television. In these series, Black and Asian characters interact with each other in ways that cause their cultures to fuse together. Although the sketches on *The Real McCoy* predominantly feature Black British comedy, there are instances when Black and Asian characters appear in the same scenes. And while it is acknowledged that these two groups are distinct, the differences are not the focus of their sketches. Rather, the focus

shifts to blending the two cultures and negotiating a new space for their interaction. In a song performed on *The Real McCoy*, for example, an Afro-Caribbean woman and an Asian woman come on stage and introduce themselves as the “Indian Ragga Girls.” Amid a fusion of Caribbean and Indian beats, as well as backup dancers of both African and Asian descent, Meera Syal and Llewella Gideon sing about a man who has cheated on both of them. While the song consists of lyrics that gesture to their specific ethnic backgrounds, Syal and Gideon both come to the conclusion that all men are cheaters:

It doesn't matter if he wears a turban or a hat
 he's bound to be a liar and a two timing rat
 It doesn't matter if he eats yam or curry
 wants to marry woman just like his mummy.
 (“Indian Ragga Girls”)

The song is briefly interrupted by dialogue during which Syal and Gideon converse in both Punjabi and Jamaican patois. The languages are not confined to ethnicity either. When Syal initiates the conversation in Punjabi, Gideon also replies in Punjabi. Instead of being confined to representations or identities bestowed on them by a normative British structure, Syal and Gideon combine their languages and cultures on their own terms. In *The Real McCoy*, Black and Asian characters are not disengaged from one another in separate scenes and storylines. Instead, identities are challenged and appropriated to create representations that are flexible and constantly changing. *The Real McCoy* then exemplifies Gray's notion of multicultural representation by blending Afro-Caribbean and Asian cultures. Through character interactions, the series create a dynamic that acknowledges cultural differences and negotiates an inclusive space for shifting and fusing identities in both communities.

The Real McCoy and *Goodness Gracious Me* not only demonstrate Gray's definition of multicultural television, but also contradict his definition of pluralist discourse. The pattern of reversal removes the hegemonic White British gaze and instead situates viewers within the perspective of Black and Asian characters. By subverting mainstream Asian stereotypes, the episode, “Going for An English,” from *Goodness Gracious Me* recognizes and critiques British racism. The sketch undermines pluralist television and becomes an example of multicultural discourse. Similarly, *The Real McCoy* episode, “Indian Ragga Girls,” complicates pluralist representations of diversity because characters of different ethnicities interact and thereby engage with cultural differences. The interactions between Syal and Gideon, furthermore, blend Afro-Caribbean and Asian cultures, illustrating Gray's notion of multicultural television by examining the interiorities of both Punjabi and Jamaican culture. In this way, the 1990's BBC sketch comedies, *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness Gracious Me* infuse Black British (Afro-Caribbean and Sub-Saharan African) and British Asian (South Asian) humour into the vernacular of British comedy, thereby situating viewers within the spaces of Black British and British Asian cultures themselves.

Works Cited

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