Ethnic Notions: Analysis Of Documentaries About Black People

Atlanta is a TV series that is unlike any other on television today and a great deal of its success is due to the originality of the show. The poor and working class of America is surely underrepresented in television today. There is a sea of TV series about families whose problems skim the surface of financial reality, but today's top TV shows are dominated by wealthy families, who never feel the need to discuss the realities of life like paying their mortgage or providing for their children. There are not enough sitcoms that focus on young people, trying to find their place in the world while struggling with ways to make ends meet. This is where Atlanta really stands out in our society. Whether or not Earn will be able to pay for rent or put food on the table for his family are constant themes throughout the first season of the show. Not only does it accurately depict the working class in America, but Donald Glover's television show Atlanta shows the cultural impact and creative influence that black people have on America. The show Atlanta does a great job at culturally representing black people accurately in television without relying on stereotypes.

Ever since the global financial crisis back in 2008, the issue of class continues to be a central concern in American culture, however, the working class continues to be underrepresented in media (Grabowski 125). Working class families only constitute 14% of 315 domestic sitcoms that were broadcasted from 1946 to 2000 (Grabowski 125). This has a great impact on society, because working class families rely on television programming more than the middle class for social connection (Grabowski 125). Since, the working class can find so few examples of families like their own on television, each new program takes on an even greater significance in both reflecting and promoting cultural values. Before Atlanta, the most notable examples of working class sitcoms were Roseanne, which took place during the wake of the American conservative movement in the 1980s, and The Middle, which was on air from 2009 to 2013 (Grabowski 125). Even though both of these shows demonstrate what it's like to live as a working class family, Atlanta has an element that makes it stand out even more, and that is race.

From the beginning of time, television has had a hard time knowing what exactly to do with black characters. Often times, the people who call the shots are white executives, who only care about the ratings and not so much about civil rights. This is not saying that the black race is never shown on television, it is just that they are almost never depicted accurately (Wilkerson). Most black people go to work everyday and are constantly trying to keep their families together. Over the years, the black race has become a sort of canvas, in which any societal ill can be projected (Wilkerson). 'Black folks have played the role of absorbing and reflecting all that is wrong with America,' said Marlon Riggs, the director of 'Color Adjustment' and 'Ethnic Notions,' two documentaries about black images (Wilkerson). Many directors and producers think this is alright, since they should be used to it by now and African Americans are viewed as being 'elastic and empty in their identity' (Wilkerson). Even though, black people have a substantial impact on pop culture in America, they are still underrepresented or misrepresented in the media and entertainment industries.

Often times, television and movies stick to the stereotypes of African Americans because it is

the easy way out and there is less explaining to do. By adhering to the stereotypes, there is a sense that everyone is on the same page. 'When you do something contrary to stereotypes, it becomes harder to tell the story because people say, 'How come?' ' said George Gerbner, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania (Wilkerson). This is where Atlanta really shines. Atlanta is able to show the stress and pains of being broke, but it is able to do so in a compassionate and, at times, humorous way, without resorting to common stereotypes. The show is serious but has humor that feels natural. The key to the show's humor, Glover says, is to make people believe in the characters. 'That's what kind of gives things stakes' (Staff). Earnest Marks, the main protagonist, is a Princeton dropout, who is perpetually underemployed, and most of the time, trying to find a new couch to sleep on. From the first episode, the audience can see that Earn, is struggling financially. Earn also has a child, Lottie, with his ex, Vanessa, who he is trying to support. Earn believes that managing his cousin's rap career as Paper Boi will lead to much greater success than his current job. Earn's parents, however, let him know that he has exhausted the goodwill of his family in his efforts to join the music industry instead of putting his energy towards landing a better-paying job.

In many episodes, Atlanta, highlights the struggles of everyday life that many of us have experienced at one point or another throughout our lives. The episode, "Go For Broke," ultimately revolves around money, which is something that many people worry about. At this point in season one, Earn, has given up on his low paying job as a credit card salesman in order to manage Alfred's rap career, which also is not paying well enough to cover the bills. We see just how broke Earn really is in the first scene of this episode when he tries to buy a kids meal at a fast food restaurant, because that is all he can afford, but he is denied the meal since he is over the age of fourteen. He ends up having to settle for sneaking soda in a water cup. Later in this episode, Earn decides that he wants to take Vanessa on a lavish, expensive date, but he does not even have enough money in his bank account to afford a full fledged value meal from a fast food restaurant. This is the reality of the working class, they are living paycheck to paycheck in order to care for their basic needs. As he opens the check inShot 12 , we are aware that Earn was in way over his head when he had the idea of bringing Vanessa to this restaurant for their romantic dinner date. From the piano playing in the background to the dimmed lighting with candles and the overly peppy waitress, it is evident that Earn is very out of his element at this restaurant.

It is revealed to us earlier in this episode that Earn is not the only one struggling financially. In order to pay his bills, Alfred, relies on selling drugs to make money. Throughout the first two episodes, it seemed like Paper Boi was gaining more fame, and had started to make some money from it, however, this episode proved that this was not the case. Paper Boi hasn't been signed yet, nor does he have an album that can be bought, so he isn't currently making any money from the music business. Drug dealing is all that Alfred can rely on and, until his music takes off, it is going to stay that way.

When writing this series, Glover created these characters to be realistic so that it is easy for viewers to find things in common with them. For example, Earn's on again and off again relationship with his girlfriend is something that many people can relate to and shows that these characters are human beings and have their own struggles. From the very beginning of the season, the audience sees that their relationship is not always smooth sailing. InShot 7 , one minute the couple is seen joking around in bed about Vanessa's curry-flavored morning breath, and then all of a sudden she tells him to kick in rent money and watch their daughter that night because she has a date with another man. The use of overhead shots and closeups, allows the

viewer to gain a better insight into the intimate lives of the characters. As the season progresses, we get an even better sense of what their relationship is really like. In the first couple of episodes, Vanessa is not the most supportive of Earn and his dream of furthering Paper Boi's rap career and she makes that very clear. InShot 6 , while out to dinner at an upscale restaurant, there is a close up shot of Vanessa as she reminds Earn that they have a daughter together who is going to need all the tools to survive, and that includes her father. This close up shot blurs out the background and only focuses on Vanessa in order to help visualize the seriousness of her words. Earn is really trying to do what he thinks is best for his family, but its seems like it just is never enough. This is evident inShot 5. As he is riding the bus with his daughter, Earn tells the Nutella man that he just keeps on losing. He is starting to believe that some people are just supposed to lose in order to create balance in the universe. Earn is motivated by the need to improve his own life and his daughter's life, but Vanessa does not seem to see the same motivation. InShot 1, Earn tries to convince Vanessa that what he is doing is the right thing. He truly believes that this new career of his will bring him success and, therefore, he will be able to provide for their family. We are unable to tell how Vanessa is feeling while Earn is delivering this speech because she has closed the door in his face. However, she emerges from their daughters bedroom calling Earn's thoughts "some dumb shit." She sees through his smooth talk and calls him out on it. Elements like Earn's often rocky relationship with his girlfriend, allow the audience to see more vulnerable sides of these characters, which makes them appear more realistic.

The uniqueness of the characters in Atlanta helps to fight common stereotypes. Glover has made it clear in many interviews that he is against stereotypes. He once stated that "stereotypes exist, but the way they exist [are] not how they are to most people. They're usually very cartoonish" (Staff). These characters in the show are your average, everyday, ordinary people and that is why they are so likable, relatable, and realistic. In the "All Black Everythang: Aesthetics, Anecdotes, and FX's" article, Glover also states that "the thesis of the show was to show people how it felt to be black, and you can't really write that down. You kind of have to feel it" (Hobson). Glover wanted viewers to feel empathy and compassion for black people since the show gives them a humble, authentic, and thorough view of their lives, unlike many other shows, which simply rely on classic stereotypes. It is common to see movies in which the only black person in the film is a criminal or comic relief. But, Atlanta paints a realistic portrait of the life of a young black male in the city of Atlanta.

For years, negative or simply cliché stereotypes, have been common when attempting to represent black people in television or movies. The issue of cultural representation in media is often not widely addressed, but innovative television shows like Donald Glover's Atlanta helps to alleviate this issue. Well-developed characters, an entertaining but realistic plot, and variety are some of the many strengths that Atlanta brings to the table. The audience is introduced to what life is like for a black man in Atlanta, not in an idealistic or cynical way, but in a realistic way.