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# UNDERMINING TRADITIONAL BLACK STEREOTYPES IN “THE FRESH PRINCE OF BEL AIR”

DI SARA CORRIZZATO

*In this paper I will suggest that The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, the African American sitcom aired in the 1990s, can be considered a vehicle through which the traditional representation of black characters in the last part of the twentieth century has been undermined, questioning the old stereotypes about African Americans, according to which a character had to be poor, ghettoised or a criminal in order to reliable.*
*Moreover, having analysed the first season of the series, I will offer some observations related to the role of the main character, starred by the actor Will Smith, and his relation with the other members of the family, highlighting that the protagonist’s task to consider his relatives’ social status and behaviour as lack of Blackness is a strategy that allows the other black characters to subvert the traditional image of African Americans offered by American mass media all over the world. The aim of this approach can be considered a way to translate the new black socio-cultural environment of the last decades of the past century in the USA, allowing viewers of the countries where the sitcom was aired to meet and understand key aspects of the American black community of that period.*
*In order to make the analysis clearer I have classified the examples taken by the various episodes according to the topic they presented or according to the characters involved in the circumstances. Moreover, I have specified the episodes taken into consideration through the abbreviation S for season and E for episode.*
*While not exhaustive, this study offers a clarifying reading of the first season of the sitcom, suggesting possible explanations for the choices made by the producers of the series.*

## 1. Introduction

*For African Americans,*
*Blackness should not resemble Whiteness simply because it does not have to.*
*Blackness, like Whiteness is unique, individual, and different.*
(Means Coleman 1998)

Judged an enigmatic African American situation comedy by Means Coleman for its original way to depict but also undermine traditional images of black stereotypes[1], T*he Fresh prince of Bel-Air* is often taken into consideration among the most interesting TV series of the last decades for its innovative way of depicting its African American characters and their way to face daily problems. This series, aired on NBC from 1990 to 1996, includes six seasons and counts several nominations and awards for its involving episodes and its success among black and white audiences alike.

One of the aims of this domcom is to highlight and to examine the everlasting cultural clash between blacks and whites and, above all, as Brooks and Marsh maintain, “the difficulties faced by blacks in a white society”[2] presenting a wealthy black family composed by the two parents, Philip and Vivian Banks - the former is a successful attorney and the latter is an English professor - and their three children: the eldest, Hilary, “a snotty Valley Girl type

concerned mostly with shopping and her social status”[3], Carlton, a preppy teenager with a snobbish behaviour that constantly shows his interest for the school and the golf club; and Ashley, the youngest of the family, who is still easily impressionable. The Banks family has also an English butler: Geoffrey, who completes the picture of a happy family of the upper-middle class. This balance is undermined by the arrival of Vivian’s nephew Will from West Philadelphia, who is sent by his single mother to live with his rich relatives “when things got little dangerous in the ‘hood”[4]. Will’s representation is deliberately different from the other characters’ construction with the result that Means Coleman’s description depicts him as “the ghettocentric, odd-man out amid the staid adults and their children”[5]. What is evident from the first episode of the first season is that Will’s character, who is uprooted and re-inserted in a world that is made of order, hierarchy, luxury and butlers, does not recognize the new environment in which he has to live and grow as true and serious.

During the first season, the relation between Will and the rest of the family is often marked by conflicts because Will pretends to keep going on living according to his principles of *blackness* learned *in the ‘hood* while the other characters, above all Uncle Phil and his cousin Carlton, would want to teach him how to live a respectable life in a white Bel-Air and help him to identify the naturalized code including integrity, respectably and ethics, recognized both by African American people and by whites.

Just for the fact that one of the possible intentions of the series is to undermine the traditional way of portraying African American figures in the American production with the purpose to foster a representation of a multifaceted black community, Will’s way of expressing and behaving becomes even more disputable throughout the episodes just because the audience learns to decode Will’s depiction, that is closer to the traditional black stereotype, recognizing the other characters as authentic even if they do not respect the old representations related to African American people.

The endless “Will - Uncle Phil” and “Will - Carlton” contrasts, indeed, are the key elements that allow the audience to understand that the essence of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* is the subversion of the traditional black stereotypes typical of the TV minstrel shows of the first part of the twentieth century - for example *Amos ‘n’ Andy* and *Beulah* - proposing frequent bitter exchanges among the male characters.

It is Will, indeed, who, considering his relatives’ belonging to the American upper class and their resulting way of living as an absence of Blackness, that allows other black characters to highlight two important concepts at the same time: on the one hand the fact that their social status and their inclusion in the American white environment does not mean they want to forget their black roots or to be excluded from the African American community; and, on the other hand, they try to break black stereotypes built by white and black actors before the television revolution, that Acham[6] places between the 1960s and 1970s, that promoted images of ghettoized and negative black people which made the integration with the white culture more difficult.

In conclusion, it is possible to maintain that throughout the whole first season, that includes 24 episodes, two tendencies are recognizable: the first one is undoubtedly the representation of the everlasting clash between the main character of the story and his relatives, questioning the traditional role of black characters in the production on television in the twentieth century, and the second one is related to the difficulties of living in a white rich neighbourhood being part of the Black community.

These two central issues are questioned and faced through two cooperating strategies: as said before, the most evident of the two is characterized by the frequent verbal fights between the main

characters, and the other one uses funny and apparently say-nothing situations to highlight the problems this rich black family has to face because of a white-centred society.

**2. Will’s character as representation of the traditional black stereotype.**

The deep difference between the hosts and the unexpected young guest is evident both through dialogues and body language. Unlike his cousins that dresses in a sober and sophisticated way, Will prefers to put on colourful clothes that although not being en pendant do mirror his temper, his dynamism and the music he usually listens to. Hip-hop, indeed is another important element that is part of his social and cultural background that is not fully accepted by the Banks because they consider it a popular form of music spread and appreciated only in the suburbs. Listening to this kind of music also influences the protagonist’s language that uses slang expressions, obviously considered too informal and rude by uncle Phil that prefers to use a refined and more polite language.

In addition, it is clear that the difference between Will and the other characters is also linked to the way in which he uses the space covered by the camera. Viewers’ eyes, indeed, immediately feel that when Will is in the room the space is almost completely filled by his body’s motions, creating a dynamism that involves the audience and winning the role of undisputed protagonist of the scene[7].

Following the Banks’ style of life would mean to abandon his old certainties and Will is not ready to change.
Therefore he demonstrates his completely refusal of his relatives’ way of living, judging their values as something too far from his own concept of member of the black community. Yet in one of the first dialogues between Will and the butler Geoffrey the young character’s disorientation in the new environment is made clear:

> Geoffrey: If you will follow me I will show you to your room
> Will: Hei man, It’s cool if you just call me Will
> Geoffrey: Master William, tradition dictates that a clean unbreakable line be drawn between a family and their butler. Therefore it is necessary for the operation of the household that you address me as Geoffrey and I, in turn, address you by your proper title: Master William.
> Will: who are you, Robo-butler,man?
> Geoffrey: Come with me, Master William.
> Will: Yo, G. Let me rap to you for a second. All this Master William stuff, I’m not down with that, man[8].
> (S1E1)

The linguistic code used by the two speakers is completely different: if the butler uses a refined language, that appears even too old-fashioned, Will’s way of interacting with the other man is totally out of the context in which he is, with the result that he admits to be a fish-out-of water person because of his total refusal of the principles that rules the new environment. Furthermore, The expressions he uses foster young audiences to identify with him, recognizing the difficulty to dip into a context that, at the very beginning, seems totally unfamiliar.

Moreover, the main element through which the clash between Will and his relatives is portrayed is just their different linguistic code that often makes the process of communication more difficult. Yet in the pilot viewers can listen to this dialogue:

> Vivian Banks: Did you enjoy the trip?
> Will: Oh, yo, the plane ride was stupid! I was looking for first class…
> Phillip Banks: Excuse me?
> Will: No, I was sayin’ the plane was dope! So, I was

> looking for…
> Phillip Banks: Excuse me?
> Will: No. Stupid, dope. Oh. No, that doesn’t mean what you… um, how would he say it? Oh, the flight was really neat, yeah.
> (S1E1)

The example shows Philip Banks’ disappointment in listening to Will’s way of interacting with the world around him but his nephew refuses to abandon his linguistic code just because he recognizes it as a way to be part of his previous black neighbourhood.

Being considered one of the protagonist’s peculiar features and, above all, the expression of African American culture, slang remains for the whole season fostering funny puns and misunderstandings but also allowing black characters to display a linguistic code different form the white one.

**3. The Banks’ social status as reflection of the rise of the middle-upper class**[9].

The clashes that happen during the episodes of the first season help the audience to support the idea of an attempt to demolish the old representation of *blackness* built before the Civil Rights Movement, in which the so-called Black Revolution took place. Such an effort probably aims at generating new black characters with their own identity, integrity and values, qualities that were almost completely erased in TV production during the Reagan presidency. The so-called Reaganism, indeed, also impacted on television and in its production[10].

It is no accident, indeed, that Philip and Vivian Banks, mirroring the social and political uplift of the previous time, are employed in those that Thernstrom and Thernstrom classify as *Selected Professions*[11], reserved to white people until few decades before. According to them, in 1940s the proportion of Black members practicing attorneys was less than 1 percent, while in 1990 Philip Banks’ profession was practised by 3,5 percent of the black people, seven times as many as in 1940. A similar increase can be noticed for Vivian’s profession. In fact great occupational advance was made by African Americans in the field of education, where the number of black schoolteachers and college teachers rose considerably: the first ones quadrupled, as the authors observe, between 1940 and 1970 and the second ones increased from 2,680 (3,5% of black community) in 1940 to 37,867 (4,8% of African Americans) in 1990s.

The fact that the fictitious Banks are created on purpose to represent the new upper-middle class and its increasing standards is also clearly visible considering that all four boys, including Will, attend school. Thus, according to Thernstrom’s and Thernstrom’s analysis[12], in 1995 yet 86,5 percent of blacks aged twenty-five to twenty-nine (in contrast to 37,7 percent of the 1960s) had attended at least four years of college and could obtain middle-class jobs requiring some years of school or a high school diploma.

However, Will’s choice in considering the qualities of his wealthy relatives compared to those of his *brothers in the ‘hood* (and therefore totally absurd and wrong), allows the other characters to show that, even if they do not come from the *‘hood*, they do not wear loose clothes, they do not use slang expressions, they are black, they remember their origins and they are not abandoning any black values. Yet in the first episode while Philip is discussing about Will’s unacceptable behaviour during a party with the members of his law firm, Will takes the opportunity to explicitly charge his uncle with forgetting his cultural identity:

> Phillip Banks: That’s your problem. You can’t take anything seriously.
> Will: Hey look, man, I don’t have the problem, all right.

> You have the problem. I remind you of who you are and what you used to be. Now I don’t know, somewhere between Princeton and the office, you got soft. You forgot who you are and where you came from.
> Phillip Banks: You think you’re so wise.
> Phillip Banks: Look at me when I’m talking to you. Let me tell you something, son. I grew up on the streets just like you. I encountered bigotry you could not imagine. Now you have a nice poster of Malcolm X on your wall. I heard the brother speak. I read every word he wrote. Believe me, I know where I come from!
> Will: You actually heard Malcolm speak?
> Phillip Banks: That’s right. So before you criticize someone, you find out what he’s all about.
> (S1E1)

This example shows what Will believes from the first time he has met his relatives: thier socio-economic status means an absence of Blackness and so he thinks necessary to remind his uncle of his origin. However his interlocutor shows a better awareness of who he is and where he comes from than Will himself with the result that the roles are subverted and Will’s haughty behaviour is criticized by the man.

Besides, it is clear that this is an implicit strategy to introduce Black historical references in an American TV series, created for African American and white audiences alike. This choice is interesting because it allows viewers where the series is run to start thinking about history not only from a white angle but also from the African American point of view.

The reference to the oppressive social order dominated by the white hegemony is also taken in consideration in the seventeenth episode in which Will, after realizing that the school course of history does not include any reference to the black people in the American history, decides to propose a black history class that will include the “whole history”, as he defines it. Therefore, he presents his project to the school by saying that “we learn about George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and them other dudes that wound on money but what about Martin Luther King and Crispus Attucks and all the other Black people that made a difference in this society?” but he is answered that nine months of lessons are not so many in order to celebrate more than 200 years of American history, so it is necessary to concentrate on some historical figures and exclude the others. Since Will’s proposal seems to be an interesting occasion for other students to learn American history from a different perspective, Aunt Viv offers to teach extra classes of black history. This is another occasion for Will to revaluate his relatives but also to question the fact his belief to be embodied the whole principle of Blackness. His belief that what he knows about black history is enough to be considered a true African American – more African American than Carlton is - is immediately challenged by his aunt’s cutting remark:

> Will: Aunt Viv, I read all The Autobiography of Malcom X three times.
> Vivian Banks: That makes you a serious student on Black history?
> Will: That’s a very important book.
> Vivian Banks: Will, you can read that book, you can wear the T-shirt, put up the posters and shout the slogans but unless you know all the story behind it you’re trivializing the entire struggle.
> (S1E17)

**4. Will’s and Carlton’s cultural clash**

Will’s ideal of *blackness* is presented through his clashes with his cousin Carlton, who is often accused to be too tied to the concept of *whiteness*. That can be noticed in the thirteenth episode where

Ashley and her little friends ask Will to tell one of his most fearful stories before they go to sleep and Will decides to talk about his first day at the Bel-Air Academy. According to Will’s story his arrival was nightmare because he realized he had to follow several rules, such as wearing a uniform and obeying a range of behavioural rules, that he judged useless and typical of white students whom he classifies as preppies. Such a classification is also used for his cousin Carlton, who is sharply criticized because he totally fits in with the school environment, its students and its traditions. During this episode Carlton is mocked by Will for his interest in good grades, golf and white hobbies. Clearly, as Bogle[13] points out, Carlton’s depiction does not foster viewers’ identification with him because he is mainly described as a boring and snooty young boy, but his continuous relation with “the world outside” allows the teenager from *West Philly* to experience different realities, considered authentic even if not part of his previous ‘*hood*. Thus cousin Carlton has the praiseworthy task to break that invisible line that clearly divides the Black and White world - typical of the media that suggest an environment in which African Americans and White people act in two distinctive social spheres - considering his circle of acquaintances’ values a mirror of his ideals and, therefore, including them in his every-day routine.

Moreover the two characters’ individuality recalls Entman’s and Rojecki’s reflection on black representation, which points out that “the predominant imagery of Blacks on television oscillates between the supremely gifted, virtuous, and successful and the corrupt, criminal, and dangerous”[14], recognizing this bipolarity in Carlton and Will, although in this case the distinction is not so well-defined. This irreconcilable difference, that Entman and Rojecki classify as “the saints and the sinners syndrome”[15], is portrayed by the two young characters’ different behaviour. Will’s use of slang, above all, draws the separating line between Carlton and himself, as well as Carlton’s refined expressions aim to emphasize their different attitude towards the surrounding dimension. Yet in the first episode, talking about a graceful rich girl, Carlton bets this woman will reject Will’s moves and he asks:

> Carlton: All right, Will. You think you can be a gentleman? How do you propose on going about it?
> Will: Carlton, it’s very easy to be a geek. All I have to do is follow you around for a day.
> Carlton: It isn’t as easy as it looks.
> (S1E1)

Will’s answer shows his low consideration of his cousin’s way of living, deciding, however, to follow his advice. After a kind of *My Fair Lady* course offered by Carlton, Philip and the butler, the audience can see Will’s transformation in what he defines a preppy. At the end of the episode the strategy is useless and Will states “This preppy nonsense. I knew women didn’t like that mess”.

This conflict can be also seen at the end of the thirteenth episode in which viewers meet Will’s disapproval in Carlton’s friends and habits and their difficulties in understanding each other:

> Will: you thought you were this big hotshot at school and I was gonna be your little charity case[16], but took your juice.
> Carlton: Will, let me explain something to you. It this society, we have this silly little thing called order and we have rules to preserve that order. If we let people break the rules, there would be chaos.
> Will: We have rules where I’m from, too. And they say you don’t rat on people.
> Carlton: The more you cling to your old ways and refuse to listen to reality the harder it’s going to be for you to fit in with my friends.
> Will: You just don’t get it, do you, man? I don’t want

> your friends, all right?
> (S1E13)

Furthermore, the everlasting clash between the two male figures can be observed in the episode called *Def Poet’s Society* in which Will enters an after school program of poetry to impress a girl he has met the day before. In order to seem more interesting Will writes brief poems, that he ascribes to a fictitious poet, and asks for help to his best friend Jazz to finish one of them. After some minutes Carlton enters the living room and starts reciting a childish poem and Will has the chance to emphasize Carlton’s lack of *blackness*:

> Will: Roses are red, violets are blue
> Jazz and I are Black, But Carlton, what are you?
> (S1E7)

Moreover this episode also gives a useful pretext for Aunt Viv to read the poem “Three modes of History and Culture” written by Amiri Baraka, finding out a short space of time to allow the audience to meet a famous African American poet and pointing out once again the Banks’ strict relation to black traditions and culture. According to this point, Bogle[17] concludes that this is an unusual moment for a sitcom in which gags and puns are the key points of the plots. However this section is immediately stopped by Will’s comment, that brings the usual atmosphere of fun back by saying “If you like to learn more about poetry, you can reach us at… Psych! We’re kidding. Good night y’all”.

Will’s and Carlton’s cultural clash increases throughout the development of the series, becoming evident in the sixth episode in which Philip and Vivian go on a trip to Palm Springs with Philip’s partner, Mr Furth. Will and Carlton are asked to drive Mr Furth’s car to the same place but during the night the two cousins get lost and after a while they are stopped by two white cops, who assume the two have stolen *the Benz*, as Will defines it. Analysing the circumstances it is clear that Will knows how the events will develop, while Carlton is totally unaware of the situation, pretending, however, to face successfully the problem. The two white policemen, by contrast, are not so willing to interact with them except for informing them of their arrest. Will’s familiarity with these circumstances is even more evident thanks to his anticipating policemen’s actions and questions:

> Will: Listen to me, when he comes up, keep your hands on the wheel.
> Carlton: Good evening officer. Carlton Banks. (stretching his right hand out of the window).
> Policeman: Keep your hands on the wheel. Where are you headed?
> Carlton: We’re going to Palm Springs. And you? Where are you headed this fine evening?
> Will: Good job. Now he’s gonna want to see your license.
> Carlton: Right.
> Policeman: Can I see your license?
> […]
> Will: Get out of the car, Carlton.
> Carlton: What?
> Will: He’s going to tell us to get out of the car.
> Carlton: You watch too much TV, Will.
> Policeman: Get out of the car.
> (S1E6)

Then, as anticipated, they end up in a jail, victims of racial profiling. The white cops, indeed, do not believe they are rich boys from Bel-Air but they are convinced they are two black car thieves. Fortunately uncle Phil can reach them and tries to explain to the officers they really are two honest boys that were driving a car to

Palm Springs with the owner’s consent. However the police officers do not trust the black man’s words; only Mr Furth’s arrival clarifies the situation. What is really interesting is Will’s and Carlton’s final exchange of opinions, in which once again the audience can experience the contrasting ways of considering the previous event: on the one hand Carlton keeps going on stating that the fact was part of a normal routine, independent from the colour of their skin, and interpreting it as a funny case of interracial contact; Will’s attitude towards the situation, by contrast, highlights his resignation in perceiving blacks’ difficulties in integrating in a white world.

Moreover, the protagonist’s behaviour aims to show and question the common belief in considering whites and blacks as two distinctive groups characterized by different values, in two words *blackness* and *whiteness*. In fact, after listening to Carlton’s consideration that they were stopped by police officers because they were driving too slowly Will replies:

> Will: … Ok, ok. I get it know. We were stopped because we were driving too slow. We were breaking the slowness limit. Okay, I never heard of that law before. But I did hear this other law. It’s called the “if you see a black guy driving anything but a burned-out Pinto you better stop him because he stole it” law. I heard about that one. But I thought it was the “Black guy law” when in actuality, it was the “slowness limit law”. Oh, thank you for sharing it with me, good night.
> Carlton: they were just doing their job. […] What’s you complaint here? We were detained for few hours, dad cleared things up, and we were released. The system works.
> (S1E6)

The discussion goes on but Carlton seems not to catch the point, so Will decides to be clearer by maintaining that “no map is going to save you, and neither is your glee club or your fancy Bel-Air address or who your daddy is. ‘Cause when you’re driving a nice car in a strange neighbourhood none of that matters”. Then he adds “They only see one thing” pointing Carlton’s colour of the skin.

Once again the construction of this series of events is not only amusing but it aims at criticizing the white strategies of the 1980s to represent African Americans as violent individuals connected with criminality, drugs or moral turpitude, with the purpose of consolidating a conservative culture where moral integrity, family and cultural values and traditional principles were strongly protected by white citizens[18]. Finally, Carlton’s perplexity about the white police officers’ behaviour is even more stressed by his father’s resigned answer when he is asked “Dad, if you were a cop and you saw someone driving a car at two miles an hour, would you stop them?” and he replies “That’s what I asked myself the first night I was stopped”.

The twenty-third episode called *72 Hours* sees the last but really significant example of these two male characters’ cultural clash. Will and Carlton quarrel again about who can be really considered part of the African American community:

> Will: All right, but just, out of curiosity, Carlton, what color are you?
> Carlton: Here we go again. Look, just because I grew up in the best neighbourhoods and pronounce the “i-n-g”s at the end of my words doesn’t make me any less black than you.
> Jazz: No. it’s that tie that doesn’t it. (referring to the tie of the uniform)
> (S1E23)

So Carlton, in order to prove his connection to Will’s idea of *blackness*, decides to bet that he would spend a weekend in Jazz’s neighbourhood, Compton, without saying anything to his parents. When the two arrive to Jazz’s *crib*, Carlton’s figure is totally out of line with the unknown environment. What the plot reserves to the audience is a surprising ending in which the rich and preppy young man finds his own place in Jazz’s circle of acquaintances, with the result that he is really glad to be invited to a dangerous party in the ‘*hood* and he decides to go. The most interesting thing is that in this episode the roles of the two are overturned. In fact Will is the only one to understand that the place in which they are living is not better than his uncle’s house and he has the task to challenge the notion of *blackness*. Following the development of the story, indeed, viewers can see that Carlton does not want to come back home any more and, therefore, it is Will that understands the situation and makes every effort to persuade his cousin of their useless bet.

Taken out of the context, this consciousness-raising is due to the fact that Will can no longer see his previous friends as best example of black people just because they are in a dangerous neighbourhood living by their wits and wasting their time. This new vision aims at conveying a different perception of the representation of blacks, contributing to destroy the old stereotypes of black characters in the viewers’ reading too. What is really significant for this analysis is the fact that this sitcom tries, as stated by Gray talking it *In Living Color*[19], to represent the diversity within Blackness and the fact that this concept of variety and its representation on commercial television leaves behind the traditional message of the past decades where African Americans’ characters “typically were restricted to the happy-go-lucky, contented slave or the foolish, inept clown”[20]. This episode’s strength, indeed, lies in the fact that it is just Will that recognizes in his relatives what he has always thought they miss as blacks: integrity, individuality and black moral values, with the result that the process recurs again. In fact, when he informs his aunt of their bet his friends accuses him to be “too white”:

> Jazz: You dimed him out.
> Will: Wait, wait, oh, oh. I did the right thing. Carlton was acting irresponsibly.
> First friend: Carlton was acting in what? In Cosby? Prince used a school-word.
> Second friend: You 5-0’d[21] your own cousin.
> Third friend: Man, you’re getting soft. Sellout.
> Will: Man, you’re about to catch an eye jammy[22]
> Third friend: you’re getting a little pale of us, ain’t you?
> (S1E23)

Equally significant is the final verbal clash between the two cousins, in which the oppressive stereotypical concept of *blackness* as a unique and monochromatic principle is undermined again:

> Carlton: Look, I never judged you for being the way you are but you always act like I don’t measure up to some rule of blackness that you carry around.
> Will: Hold it… Wait a minute. You don’t judge me? You do everything but carry a big old gavel[23] around. I mean, you treat me like some kind of idiot just ‘cause I talk different to you.
> Carlton: Differently.
> (S1E23)

**5. Subversion of traditional stereotypes through secondary characters.**

The importance of being and staying black in a white society[24] in often highlighted by the presence of other satellite characters who

are functional to foster elucidative conversations and to depict different ways of living black identity.
In one of the first episodes viewers can meet uncle Phil’s parents that have come to visit for the weekend because his son has won a prestigious award. Considering the fact that Philip seems to forget his origin, worrying only about his reputation, it is his mother that has the task to remind the audience who he is and where he comes from, telling a couple of brief anecdotes about his adolescence. These brief stories refer quite explicitly to the difficulty of black people to gain equal rights and social status during the twentieth century. In fact, although the episode follows the formulaic characterizations of the sitcom focused on gags and humour, these anecdotes deal with Philip’s success in fighting for his rights and holding an official position:

> Grandma: Did you know he won the Young Farmers of American Pig Raising Trophy?
> Will: No, I didn’t know that, but I’d love to have some details of that.
> Grandma: Won it four years running. They had to retire his slop bucket
> Will: slop bucket? I can’t wait until he wakes up!
> Grandma: Respect your elder, son. […] you know, he was the First Black President of the Young Farmers.
> Will: was that like a big thing?
> Grandma: Oh, my, yes! […] you know, then we also had those White rest rooms?
> Will: yeah!
> Grandma: Well, I remember this one time we was downtown and Zeke had had too much lemonade and suddenly he just lit out from me and split right into that White rest room. They told him to leave but little Zeke just stood his ground.
> (S1E4)

The day after these facts are revealed Will decides to tell to one interviewer those stories to make his uncle’s previous life more interesting but this situation causes uncle Phil’s embarrassment. Therefore in the final scene it is Will who highlights the importance of his origin and, above all, of his actions, by saying “Those stories make you look great. I mean, you did a lot for Black people that I didn’t even know”. Mr Banks, however, does not recognize the importance of his achievements, considering his official position in the Farmers Organization something really stupid, but Will concludes by declaring “You were the first Black president. That’s something.”
The attention being focused on Philip Bank’s origin and experience in his native Yamacraw, Will’s well-defined figure of an upper-middle class citizen without identity begins to fade away, placing on the previous image a representation of a black man aware of his people’s history.

The attempt to undermine black stereotypes becomes evident in another episode of the first season in which viewers meet Will’s friend Ice Tray. Making clear first that Ice Tray represents almost completely just that black stereotype which the series carefully avoids to include, it is thanks to him that Aunt Viv highlights the importance of education and work rather than neighbourhood. Ice Tray suggests an image of himself that recalls in the viewers’ mind representations of black characters as lazy, buffoonish and ghettoised. This boy attracts immediately Hilary’s attention, irritating her mother who expresses strong disapproval with this relation. Will does believe that the reason of this refusal is linked to Ice Tray’s socio-economic situation, but he gets it wrong:

> Will: It’s a shame Ice Tray had to leave before he could ruin Hilary’s life.
> Vivian Banks: Will, I’m sorry I said that.
> Will: But you meant it. It was fine when he was just

> some clown to come out here to bring me some cheesesteaks and cheer me up. But the second you found out Hilary liked him, you wanted him outta here. That’s something I’d expect from Uncle Phil, but not from you, Aunt Viv. […]
> Will: And Tray is my friend. We grew up together. We’re from the same neighborhood, we’re the same person, and if Tray’s not good enough for this family, then maybe I ain’t either.
> Vivian Banks: No! You are not the same person. […]
> Vivian Banks: I can see why you like Ice Tray; he’s a lot of fun, everything is a joke to him: school, work, people. He doesn’t care about anything.
> Will: He always managed to care about me.
> Vivian Banks: Will, I’m glad he’s a good friend, but that doesn’t change who he is. I’m sorry, but a young man his age should be able to do something else besides fight and jump fences. […]
> Vivian Banks: Well, while he was protecting your books, where the hell were his?
> (S1E5)

Ice Tray’s figure, included in Bogle’s classification of “inner-city kids who were, in some way or another, dim-witted jokesters or people associated with crime”[25], seems a fish-out-of-water character in an environment where clever, articulate and goal-oriented black people live. Moreover Vivian Banks’ explanations are unassailable, showing Will that the problem is not his friend’s origin but his lack of education and goals for the future.

**6. Conclusions**

As suggested in the previous pages, the socio-cultural conflict between the main character of the sitcom and his relatives, the Banks, may be considered the core of the series. Such a clash, indeed, has not to be seen as an obstacle to the balance of the domestic dimension or a limit to the development of the representation of African American characters, but possibly a starting point to depict and question the situation of the black upper-middle class in the white American environment of the last part of the twenty century.

Thanks to Will’s uninterrupted critiques of his relatives’ way of living, and to his considering himself as the true representative of what blackness means, viewers have the possibility to question this character’s representation, celebrating the other characters’ authenticity. Such a vision help viewers to consider African American environment a multifarious community, abandoning the old image of black people built by mass media in the previous decades of the twentieth century.

The dialogues presented in this paper demonstrate that the image promoted by the series aims to demolish traditional ways of portraying African American people and creating new characters that could give viewers all over the world a vision of the American society of that period. Such a strategy could have a pedagogical aim, according to which the promotion of new black characters could foster the integration and the interaction between black and white people.

However, it is also true that the Italian translation of the dialogues analysed tends to avoid any explicit reference to the concept of blackness and to what this principle represents for all the characters. Therefore, producers’ original intention is often neutralized in the second version, in which the very essence of the dialogues is frequently ridiculed with the purpose to make the Italian audience laugh.

1. Means Coleman R.R., *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*, New York/London, Garland Publishing, 1998, p. 114.[↩]

2. Brooks T., Marsh E., *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows -1946-present-*, (Seventh Ed.), New York, Ballantine Books, 1999, p. 368.[↩]
3. Bogle D., *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, p. 384.[↩]
4. Brooks T., Marsh E., *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows -1946-present-*, (Seventh Ed.), New York, Ballantine Books, 1999, p. 368.[↩]
5. Means Coleman R.R., *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*, New York/London, Garland Publishing, 1998, p. 114.[↩]
6. Acham C., *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Blackness*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2004.[↩]
7. The observation could be related to the white concept of animalization, according to which blacks’ body language is compared to the animal motions.[↩]
8. The use of the word master could foster a post-colonial reading of the relation between the characters; however, considering the humorous aim of the sitcom, such a choice could be read as an auto-ironic element linked to the social and racial black heritage. In the Italian version, however, the master/servant concept is made explicit with reference to the plantations.[↩]
9. Although the Banks belong to the upper class, the jobs Philip and Vivian get are classified as middle class occupations by Thernstrom and Thernstrom; for this reason the expression upper-middle class seems more appropriate.[↩]
10. Ibid., and Gray H., *Watching race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness”*, Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 1995.[↩]
11. Thernstrom S., Thernstrom A., *America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible*, New York, First Touchston Edition, 1999, pp. 187.[↩]
12. Ibid., p.191.[↩]
13. Ibid., p.390.[↩]
14. Entman R.M., Rojecki A., *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 207.[↩]
15. Ibid.[↩]
16. This expression is linked to the existing stereotype according to which African Americans are considered people who need help. This concept also implies that blacks have to show their gratitude to all those who help them.[↩]
17. Bogle D., *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, p. 391.[↩]
18. Gray H., *Watching race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness”*, Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 1995.[↩]
19. Ibid., pp.144-146.[↩]
20. Means Coleman R.R., *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*, New York/London, Garland Publishing, 1998, p. XI.[↩]
21. Derived from the TV series Hawaii Five-0 (first broadcast in 1968), this term is commonly used for police or a police officer. In this context 5-0 is a verb that means to denounce somebody - to reveal somebody’s activities (esp to a person in authority).[↩]
22. Term used to describe a black eye (to punch somebody in the face).[↩]
23. It is a small hammer used by a person in charge of a meeting or an auction as a signal for order or attention.[↩]
24. In his analysis of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* in *Prime Time Blues* Donald Bogle includes Susan Borowitz’s explanation in which she declares that one of the most important questions the series aimed to analyse was “How do you succeed in a white man’s world and stay black?” (p.387).[↩]
25. Bogle D., *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. p. 391.[↩]

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« REALISMO, BLACK HUMOR, EUFEMISMI E TURPILOQUIO NELLA NARRATIVA DELLA GUERRA DEL VIETNAM
LO SPETTRO DELLA GUERRA IN “WHY ARE WE IN VIETNAM?” DI NORMAN MAILER »