

The Pitfalls of Positive Representation II

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Part of what has changed in the evolution of television minorities is our conception of what constitutes a minority. Since *The Cosby Show* first premiered, television has expanded its view of minorities to consider difference beyond simply difference in race and traditional notions of gender. Though the majority of television programming still emerges from a white, relatively affluent and heteronormative perspective, more shows have offered African American or Latino characters, as well as gay and transgender characters. It is unusual, however, for one to see a single character representing multiple minority groups, such as gays of color, or people of color with physical disability. It's as if the semiotics of difference is such that we can only process divergence from one presumed norm at a time. Furthermore, the scope and depth of diversity often differs significantly between networks and genres. For instance, HBO's *The Wire* offered several relatively nuanced gay characters of color, in stark contrast to the sterile caricatures of sexual and ethnic minorities typically found on network sitcoms.

In the past when transgender characters appeared on television at all they tended to be positioned as either punch lines or cautionary tales, when not conflated entirely with gay characters. In the past ten years, arguably because of the impact of acclaimed Hollywood films such as *Boys Don't Cry* and *Transamerica*, television has begun to engage transgender characters as something other than killers, victims and sex workers. Talk show representation of transgender characters has evolved from the primitive salaciousness of *The Jerry Springer Show* to the more evolved salaciousness of shows such as *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil*, which have positioned transgender people as courageous and tragic in pursuing their "authentic" selves despite the obstacles they have faced. These idealized talk show guests are almost invariably educated, white professionals, completely at odds with the tacky, mercurial wackos found on *Jerry Springer*. Similarly, the presumably more evolved fictional transgender characters with professional careers, such as the college professor on the short-lived *Max Bickford* or the wealthy publisher on *Ugly Betty*, have challenged the idea that transgender people are all sex workers living on the fringes of society. The problem is that a significant portion of transgender Americans are sex workers living on the fringes of society, particularly if they are not white and educated, largely because of a confluence of factors based in social stigma that is perpetuated in the mass media, and perpetuated even by the assertion that to create acceptance of a minority group through the mass media one must strip representations of problematic racial, economic or even gender variances.

Positive representation has tended to be synonymous with idealized representation, advancing oppositional stereotypes that can be viewed as comfortably acceptable to a presumably mainstreamed television audience. Though this emergent representation of transgender people on American television is mostly a positive development, in that it offers an alternative to the primarily negative representation that came before which positioned transgender people outside of presumably normal society, representation of a

homogenized view of transgender people does a disservice to the viewers and to the transgender community. In a similar way, the Huxtable family of *The Cosby Show* offered us a view of economically successful black America in opposition to earlier disenfranchised characters. The Huxtables, with their education, affluence and confident upper middle class banter contrasted sharply with the disadvantaged Evans family of *Good Times* and the awkward nouveaux riche *Jeffersons*, seeming to declare that black America had arrived at the economic Promised Land and that the racial tension and economic injustices of the previous decades had evaporated, despite strong evidence to the contrary. Recent representations of transgender people have begun planting the seeds for a new stereotype of transsexuals as white, male-to-female and middle class, despite sociological evidence suggesting that the demographics of transgender Americans is significantly more diverse. In doing so, they increase awareness and acceptance of some kinds of transgender people, at the same time they suggest that deviations from this idealized view of the transgender population are somehow less tolerable and less deserving of acceptance and respect.