

The Pitfalls of Positive Representation I

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Black Femininity has no place for Positive Representation: *Let's Talk about Pep* and the Possibilities of Cultural Difference

As a long-time VH1 *Celebreality* sycophant, I made it mandatory viewing to watch the series premiere of Sandy Dennis's, otherwise known as Pep of Salt'n'Pepa's new show *Let's Talk about Pep*, a reality hybrid of UPN's *Girlfriends* and HBO's *Sex in the City*. Watching a reality show about four women of color (including Joumana Kidd, who is coded as racially ambiguous although some fans believe she is of middle Eastern heritage) who sit at a restaurant, eat lunch, and gossip about each other's lives surprised and engaged me. It struck me because, for the first time, I was able to identify with a character whose personality was most similar to mine. And: she was a black woman. It was not like the process of disidentification Jose Munoz describes where I have to leave my black womanhood behind in order to find pleasure in watching [white] characters onscreen. I didn't have to approximate identification as I have had to do in the past with Buffy, Samantha or Miranda—these folks were just like me. Jacque, my televisual alter-ego has short hair, a no-nonsense personality, and some good damn sense—just like me. But she also had some issues and some messy ideas about concepts like sex and dating—just like me. My point is that, the three-dimensionality of her character may make her less “positive” in the ways that positive representation has been defined, but it makes her persona resonate more to a demographic of women just like me—that is, the invisible black women. Sure, these women are cast in similar archetypes to the females on *Girlfriends* and *Sex in the City*: there is the hypersexual one, the rational one, the slightly conservative one, and the main character who's in-between types. And I am not even suggesting that the benchmarks of achievement they have set for themselves are not in accordance with the values of whiteness. Further, I am not even suggesting that VH1 has become fascinated with cultural specificity to the degree that they've stopped selling *Let's Talk about Pep* as a show about “any young woman in a big city looking for love.” No, all of the common frames of whiteness are in place and, yet, the way that these women of color embody these types suggests more about cultural difference than about them trying to replicate the HBO foursome.

Moreover, the ways that these characters negotiate black femininity against a backdrop of whiteness diverges from the normatively white status quo. For example, when Pep went on a date with Tom, who is Asian, the question of Pep being okay dating an Asian man was discussed in a fashion that made me shake my head in agreement. Cultural signifiers, including dialogue similar to “Girl, you ever dated an Asian man before?” rang true to my own experience. Further, as Pep narrated the date night to her girls, the video takes us to the moment when Tom serves her a combination of sushi and watermelon. A quick cut to a reaction shot of Pep reveals her trying to overcome the feeling that she's gotten caught up in some Asian man's fantasy of a black woman and her “favorite” fruit. The camera cuts back to present time and lunch with the ladies who all seem to be convinced (at least their faces suggest they were convinced) of the same. It is only after Pep says, “I don't think he meant it like that” (never explicitly naming what the problem is because it's an “inside” joke) that the ladies return to their place of ease.

Similarly, when my alter-ego Jacque went on a date with a fellow journalist who confessed to having been incarcerated years before, the look on Jacque's face in response gave me such joy. Her face was equal parts "needle off record" and "child, please".

Finally! Finally, there is representation of black femininity that is not simply the brown-skinned versions of white femininity. Finally, there are images specifically geared toward black women. And, finally, we're allowed to be messy and flawed and professional and sexual and feminine. My belief is that this show counters normative whiteness by simply acknowledging that it is an impossible and futile feat to achieve in the first place. In fact, by eschewing the pitfalls of positive representation, namely the one-dimensionality and model minority status of black characters, *Let's Talk about Pep* slyly sidesteps normative whiteness. In closing, I recognize that my praise of this program's nuanced and messy representation can be just as dangerous as labeling it "positive." However, I would argue that the position of identification for a black woman like me should not be overlooked simply because of fears of essentialism. To the contrary, I believe that small acts of strategic essentialism are necessary to cultural difference and recognition. And *Let's Talk about Pep* is a fine example of such a move.