

The Pitfalls of Positive Representation I

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In important ways, a group of college students in North Carolina invented positive representations of African Americans on television. By pioneering sit-ins in 1960 and freedom rides the following year, this vanguard of the U.S. civil rights movement inadvertently turned telejournalism into one of the movement's most powerful weapons. Far sooner than most, these students recognized television's power and developed effective means to use it. They quickly learned to create reality TV in the streets of Southern towns—morality plays that pitted “good Negroes” against the iconic representatives of a corrupt and vicious status quo. As their strategies were embraced by more conservative activists including Martin Luther King, however, these leaders also were among the first to chafe against the limits of television's “positive” representations. Their counter-strategies also continue to influence contemporary television, including the “Black outlaw” icon pioneered by Stokely Carmichael and the Oakland Black Panthers.

Television's early, positive representations depended on the spectacle of nonviolence resistance. Through bloody trial-and-error, activists discovered that white audiences responded in politically useful ways only to images of blameless victims. It worked best if the victims were literally children, as in Birmingham, but white audiences also proved willing to be outraged by violence committed against adults—as long as these adults fulfilled their roles as martyrs. In short, to evoke sympathy from mainstream white audiences, one had to occupy a moral plane far beyond that audience's ordinary reality. Audiences reserved the right of violent resistance for themselves, but they offered their support only to those Black people willing to turn the other cheek. As James Baldwin observed, “It's only when a Black man says that he might go out and find himself a gun that the country becomes Christian for the first and only time.”

Fast forward to the present, and we find positive representations still structured by inhuman expectations, such as those that attached to the pre-lapsarian Tiger Woods and the pre-election Barack Obama. It is notable that both of these characters were known for their otherworldly calm—both have been compared to Vulcans, for example. The key to “positive” portrayals of African Americans on television seems to turn on anger, or rather the absence of it. In our media landscape, righteous fury continues to be an emotion mainly reserved for whites.

One way to track this structure's durability and evolution across television's first half century is through analogy: Alexander Scott is to John Shaft as Cliff Huxtable is to Tupac Shakur. Two characters played by Bill Cosby occupy the first terms of the equation. Both offer palatable, mainstream forms of Black masculinity: the straight-laced Rhodes Scholar/secret agent from *I Spy* (1965-68) and the comedic obstetrician/perfect father from *The Cosby Show* (1984-92). Although “Scotty” Scott was allowed to become angry, he maintained the iron composure and control that was so admired by the racial majority, and he never, ever talked about race. Cliff Huxtable offered similarly benign pleasures. Like most African Americans on television, his job was to make the audience

laugh. The analogy's opposing terms are fulfilled by Shaft and Shakur: Black outlaws, gun-wielding characters of righteous rage and extraordinary charisma, whose cross-race appeal was limited primarily to young adults.

The *differences* evident in the analogy are also telling. Shaft, of course, was a cinematic hero. (A brief televisual effort starring Richard Roundtree ended after seven episodes.) During the era of three and four networks, television never found a way to make Black anger safe for white audiences. By the early nineties, however, things had changed. Over the strong objections of critics including Bill Cosby and Dan Quayle, television found a way to monetize the Black outlaw, through the rap music video.