

Returning to the Roots

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As noted in the organizing question, racial representation on television in the 20th century as well as its critique revolved around the issue of diversity. Reports produced through such groups as the NAACP concerning the state of representation frequently emerged and indicted the television industry along the lines of its practices of minority exclusion. At the same time, media scholarship attested to the limited and stereotypical portrayals of people of color when made visible on screen. To assess the current moment of racial representation, I suggest that framing the debate around previous issues concerning diversity as well as progressive and regressive imagery does not allow us to understand the nuances of how race functions on television in the 21st century. In particular, I argue that it is a commitment to elements of neoliberalism in televisual representation that announces and manages racial injury, specifically iterations of anti-black violence, that allow for a spectatorial confrontation with America's past in the present.

This response piece takes as its impetus the FX anthology series *American Horror Story* (2011). The third season entitled "Coven" follows witches across generations in New Orleans who find themselves in the midst of a violent witch hunt as well as a complex interracial conflict exemplified by the divide between the coven's white Supreme figure, a white socialite slave owner, and a powerful black voodoo priestess. In a striking scene from "Coven," black witch Queenie (Gabourey Sidibe) forces the decapitated head of former slave owner Madame LaLaurie (Kathy Bates) to watch the entirety of 1977 TV miniseries *Roots* (1977) as repentance for violence against African Americans during the 19th century. The pedagogical moment that allows for LaLaurie to witness and acknowledge a history of black subjugation is made possible through dark humor. It is this ironic viewing distance from past racial oppression within mediated representation that haunts television's depictions of blackness in the 21st century.

If racial subjects bear what scholars such as Jose Muñoz and Sasha Torres have discussed is the "burden of liveness" on television, this presentation examines how TV representation accounts for the ghostly resonances of slavery and its afterlife in the medium's present. Premium network dramatic series such as HBO's *The Wire* (2002-2008) to Netflix fare *Orange is the New Black* (2013) deal with blackness and criminality from the surveillance and regulation of black male bodies in urban milieus to the black female experience of mass incarceration. Cult programming including HBO's *True Blood* (2008-2014), The CW's *The Vampire Diaries* (2009), and Fox's *Sleepy Hollow* (2013) present racialized histories through the lens of the fantasy genre. And ABC's *Scandal* (2012) implicitly deals with the charged politics of race in the Obama era. I focus on the third season of *AHS* as emblematic of this turn in television representation due to its direct engagement with the horrific specter of racial slavery.

As the scene of “Coven” described above suggests, the televisual capacity for redressal towards anti-black violence is filtered through spectatorship. Here, wounds of subjugation are deemed to be repaired by optical directives that are at once sadistic and masochistic. Public intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates’ much-discussed 2014 *Atlantic Monthly* article, “The Case for Reparations,” brought to the forefront the controversial issue concerning racial reparations -- specifically as it concerns African American oppression and discrimination from historical enslavement to present-day forms of institutionalized racism. Taking up the concept of reparations in an expanded field to explore its function in the realm of race and representation in television, I thus return to the *Roots* and ask: What would it mean to think of the reparative function of television in the 21st century? How does television compensate for racial injury in both form and content? In preliminary approaching these questions, I have gestured towards how the medium operates under a logic that announces racial injury explicitly whereby the act of expressing wounded-ness and the desire for restitution is made palpable through televisual modes of address. Anti-black violence is therefore self-managed through this enactment of bringing past and present together on screen in form and content. Specifically, today’s serialized TV programming’s depiction of racial injury employs repetition but with a (politics of) difference that produces alternative viewing practices in a “post-racial” America. Thus, television’s current transmission of reparations re-conceptualizes a civil rights subject for the contemporary moment.