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TV in Black and Gay: Examining Constructions of Gay Blackness and Gay Crossracial Dating on *GRΣΣK*

“To be normal, even to be normally deviant (queer, crippled), is to be white” – Richard Dyer¹

Popular television shows including *Will & Grace*, *Sex and the City*, *Brothers and Sisters*, and *Modern Family* routinely depict gay men. Yet the common characteristic among most televisual representations of gay men is that they are usually white. While cable television, particularly subscription-based channels like HBO, Showtime, and here!, have contributed to a more racially diverse gay male televisual population, there are still only a few black gay men on television.

While scholars have researched televisual representations of both gay men and black men, the two areas have not often converged (primarily because of the lack of representations available for study). This essay integrates both modes of analysis, focusing on Calvin Owens, a black gay character on the ABC Family series *GRΣΣK* (*Greek*, 2007-). I argue that there is a shifting emphasis on Calvin’s gayness and blackness depending on the situation in which Calvin finds himself; in relationships with white men, Calvin is positioned as more “black” whereas his gayness is emphasized when he is in situations with heterosexual characters. This positioning allows Calvin to be read within the framework of what Evelyn Higginbotham calls a “politics of respectability,” in which behavior and attitude modification are employed as a strategy to garner mainstream acceptance.² In the “post *Will*

& *Grace*-era,” Calvin is both “cutting edge,” because he is a black gay male – a departure from televisual gay white maleness – and respectable, because he is getting a college education and displays few characteristics that make him “stereotypically gay.” By combining two types of “otherness” in one character (blackness and gayness), ABC Family is able to appear cutting edge by including crossracial gay relationships (and a gay character who is not white) while conforming to familiar tropes of “race neutrality” in black characters on television.

Greek is set on the campus of the fictitious Cyprus-Rhodes University (CRU), where a group of students navigate their way through college life. With the exception of Amber Stevens, the actress who plays Ashleigh Howard, and Paul James, the actor who plays Calvin Owens, all the characters are white. The network, which reaches more than 95 million homes via basic cable, was founded in 1977 by Pat Robertson, a Christian conservative televangelist, preacher, and media mogul. In 2001, the network was bought by Disney who, five years later, changed the name of the network from The Family Channel to ABC Family – a year before *Greek* hit the airwaves. With the rebranding, Disney began describing ABC Family’s programming as a hybrid of shows and movies that reflects “today’s families.”³ It appears

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that the programming directors and developers at ABC Family believe that gay men (albeit ones who do not engage in sexual relationships) are part of what can be viewed as inoffensive entertainment. But, where ABC Family (and *Greek*) departs from majority representations is when one considers that *Greek* features one of only four representations of black gay men on television.⁴ I argue that as the network was rebranding itself for “modern families” in a “post-*Will & Grace* era,” it sought to air a show that included diversity (albeit within a colorblind discourse) in a bid to appear “cutting edge.” It is in this specific television environment that a black gay character like Calvin Owens is possible.

Crossroads: At the Intersection of Gay Street and Black Avenue

I argue that *Greek* employs a color blind strategy. In other words, race isn't mentioned or relevant in the constructed televisual world of *Greek*. While Calvin is openly gay (by his admission), he is not explicitly black. In many ways, the show frames Calvin within the tradition of what Catherine Squires calls “‘race neutral’ characters on shows with otherwise all-White casts.”⁵ Although defining essential blackness is problematic, in these representations, there is nothing inherently “black” about the characters and their race is never discussed.

“Race neutral” characters became a staple of television in the 1960s as shows with white majority casts began to integrate characters of color into their narratives. These characters, like Alexander Scott on *I Spy* and the title character on *Julia*, showed a “very constrained vision of blacks in white society that promote[d] assimilation, not integration.”⁶ Herman Gray argues that the blacks on these otherwise white television shows are “void of any hint of African American traditions, social struggles, racial conflicts, and cultural difference.”⁷ One of the other problematics associated with these characters is that they often lack any semblance of personal lives, romantic entanglements, and/or connections to the black community. Unlike the “race neutral” characters of these and other 1960s television shows, Calvin has romantic relationships, but he has little connection to the black community.

Because Calvin is not “made black” and is disconnected from other black people, the assumption is that race is “neither an issue nor much of a plot point.”⁸ Yet, the opposite is true. While his race is not made explicit or acknowledged, the producers code Calvin as black, a topic I will discuss later. This disconnection from black people (and presumably black culture) marks Calvin as a gay black man rather than a black gay man. The difference, according to Darieck Scott, is that a gay black man has “political, social and cultural allegiances...to ‘white’ gay politics, to white gay men and to ‘white’ cultural forms” whereas a black gay man puts his blackness before his gayness.⁹ In other words, it seems that Calvin privileges his gayness over his blackness.

In privileging his gayness, which Richard Dyer reminds us is equated with whiteness, it follows that Calvin would desire a white romantic partner.¹⁰ Calvin must be constructed within the “race neutral” tradition of television characters in order to be constructed as a suitable romantic partner for the white men he dates. As such, he is a second-generation college student (at least, his father is the only generational connection the viewer knows is college-educated), and a pledge of a racially integrated fraternity (the same one to which his father is a member). In a television universe that often positions black men as uneducated and/or criminal, he is “different;” Calvin is framed as “one of the good ones.” As Erica Chito Childs argues about media representations of interracial couples, “the person of color involved [in the relationship] is presented as an exceptional person, usually removed from their racial community, and the ‘goodness’ of the white person is confirmed through the relationship.”¹¹ Picking up on Childs’s notion of black exceptionalism, Calvin is placed squarely within the color blind, racially integrated world of CRU. This placement helps to achieve one of the primary functions of “race neutrality:” to neutralize blackness.

When in relationships with white men, however, the producers of *Greek* code Calvin as a black man. Calvin is always the more masculine person in the relationship when compared to his white suitor. When looking at Calvin’s relationships on a feminine/masculine homosexuality spectrum, he trends more closely to the masculine end of the

spectrum. His first love interest on the show is Heath, a member of a rival fraternity (Kappa Tau Lambda) who, in the episode “Liquid Courage,” expresses an interest in having a relationship with Calvin. While Heath is not constructed as wholly stereotypically feminine, a feminine reading of Heath becomes possible when juxtaposed against Calvin’s reticence to have something more than a sexual relationship. Consider this post-coital exchange from “Liquid Courage:”¹²

Heath: Hey, I was thinking. Maybe we could spend a little more time together. Go do something... clothed.

Calvin: (Laughs) You mean something like, um, picking you up in my father’s minivan, bring you some flowers, pay for a movie and hope you hold my hand during the scary parts? (Pause) What did you have in mind?

Heath: I don’t know... Grab some food?

This dialogue takes place while Calvin gets dressed and prepares to leave while Heath lies in bed. Calvin clearly wants to keep the relationship casual and carnal while Heath wants to explore the relationship romantically. Later in the same episode, Calvin asks “Why can’t people be satisfied with the way things are? Why do [suitors] always have to push things to the next level?” He goes on to say that what he has with Heath is not a relationship, but a “thing.” In this way, Calvin’s black masculinity is asserted as he seeks to “sow his wild oats” rather than settle down – an image of the black man often cultivated in popular culture.¹³ As Gray says, popular culture’s construction of black masculinity is exemplified by “drugs, sexism, pleasure, excess, nihilism, defiance, pride and the cool pose of disengagement;” they are all part of the “style, personality, vision and practice of an assertive heterosexual black masculinity.”¹⁴ While Calvin does not entirely exhibit all of these characteristics of stereotypical black masculinity, he conforms to some of these popular culture idea(l)s of black masculinity through placing more value on sexual pleasure than relationship-building.

While Calvin occasionally demonstrates some behaviors that can be read as indicative of his homosexuality, they are not an overarching part of his character on the show. In the episode “The Rusty Nail,” from season one, the sorority Zeta Beta Zeta (ZBZ) is looking for an Omega Chi Delta (Omega Chi) pledge to help plan a joint mixer. When Evan, the president of Omega Chi asks for a volunteer, he frames planning parties as a feminine (or homosexual) activity:

Evan: Goats, I need a volunteer. (All pledges raise their hands). Hold on, hear what it is first. I need someone to be the Zeta Beta’s errand boy this week. (Pledges are still excited and raising their hands). I’m *not* talking about party raids and pillow fights. Alright, this job will suck! You gotta help them plan the mixer. Shop. Decorate. All that girl stuff. Alright, who’s willing? (No one raises their hand).

Calvin: (Sheepishly raises his hand).

Evan: Pledge Owens, I should have known my little brother would volunteer. Way to take one for the team.

This scene frames Calvin as gay by positioning shopping, decorating, and planning parties as things that girls (or gays) do, not “real men.” In addition, Calvin’s fraternity bothers’ masculinity is affirmed while Calvin is concomitantly coded as gay in the beginning of the same scene. Calvin and his pledge brothers are cleaning the fraternity house and speaking lasciviously about the Zeta Beta Zeta women:

Pledge #1: I didn’t know ZBZ girls were hot!

Pledges, except Calvin: Yeah!

Pledge #2: Did you see the redhead? What I wouldn’t give...

Calvin: Guys! Can we just...get this done?

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These two scenes, taken together, “otherize” Calvin – he is not like the other guys and in fact is constructed as being more like a “girl.” He doesn’t mind shopping, planning parties, and decorating and has no interest in talking about girls in a sexual manner. In addition, he doesn’t seem to mind doing “women’s work” (cleaning) while his fraternity brothers appear to hate the task they’ve been assigned. In other words, Calvin exists at the intersection of Gay Street and Black Avenue where either gayness or blackness is emphasized and deployed based on the situation in which he finds himself.

Forbidden Fruit: Cultural Capital and Gay Crossracial Relationships

Over the course of *Greek*’s three seasons, Calvin has three relationships, all with white men. The first is with Heath, who, as mentioned earlier, is a member of a rival fraternity. The second is with a man named Michael, who is a graduate student at CRU. The third relationship is with Grant, who is a member of the same fraternity (Omega Chi) as Calvin. Notably, Calvin is the only black gay man on campus (or at least the only one shown and framed as both gay and black). As such, there are only gay white men in his eligible dating pool. I argue that because Heath, Michael, and Grant are all introduced to the show solely as romantic partners, there is no reason that precludes black suitors from being introduced to serve the same purpose. If gayness equals whiteness, then the show works to position black gay men as anomalous based on the availability of three white suitors for the lone black gay man on campus. As Dwight A. McBride argues, gay black maleness “does not jive with the televisual image of gay life that has been manufactured, packaged, and produced by mainstream U.S. culture.”¹⁵ In other words, *Will & Grace*, *Modern Family*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and the U.S. version of *Queer as Folk* are among the accepted versions of televisual gay life whereas *Spin City*, *Noah’s Arc*, and *Greek*, which feature black gay men, are anomalous.

More importantly, the ways that the show introduces and incorporates these other gay characters reinforce the idea that all gay men are attracted to other gay men. When Calvin’s friend

Ashleigh wants to introduce Calvin and Michael, the following exchange occurs:¹⁶

Ashleigh: Oh my god! It’s Michael, my French TA. Didn’t I tell you about him? He’s gay. Well, I think. You guys would be *so* cute together!

Calvin: Why? Because we’re the only two gay guys that you know?

Ashleigh: No, you’ve got it all wrong. I only think that he’s gay. I don’t really know. But, would a straight guy go to a Xanadu sing-along?

Calvin: I wouldn’t date a guy that went to a Xanadu sing-along anyway, so I think I’ll pass.

Ashleigh: Michael! Hi! This is Calvin. Remember I was telling you about him. Calvin’s been to France, too. Michael just got back from France.

Michael: Hey.

Calvin: So, um, how was France?

Michael: It was nice. Went to some lectures, I saw some art. How was it when you went?

Calvin: Oh, I was 9. I had escargot and then threw up in the elevator of the Eiffel Tower and started crying.

Michael: Oh my god, me too!

Ashleigh: You guys should get coffee and talk more about France.

Michael: Well we are both gay.

Ashleigh: So, you are gay. I knew it!

Michael: So, how about it?

Calvin: Sure, why not?

In this exchange, Ashleigh assumes that Calvin and Michael will hit it off because they are gay and have both been to France, although Calvin's visit occurred when he was a child. While Calvin initially offers a critique of the heterosexist notion that all gay men are attracted to one another, ultimately he invalidates the critique by acquiescing.

Calvin's agreement to go out on a date with Michael could also be read as a validation of whiteness and its intrinsic cultural capital.¹⁷ As McBride argues "much like [cultural] capital, whiteness is a valuable commodity in a fundamentally racist culture. Its value is so compelling, so complete, that it reaches even the most intimate parts of our lives as sexual, desiring and loving subjects."¹⁸ Despite initially having little in common other than being gay and having visited France, when Michael extends the offer for a coffee date, Calvin's obvious answer is "yes" because white men represent valuable capital. In other words, it is less that Calvin sees common ground, but rather it is Michael's whiteness that is attractive. Michael's whiteness can be read as a bridge into gay normativity for Calvin and a way for him to possess, by proximity, gay cultural capital.

Additionally, when Calvin ultimately initiates their break up, he cites their differences as the reason:

Calvin: I just think that we should break up. I like you, Michael. I really do. I just... I just think we're too different, you know. I mean, this isn't me (referring to the Moroccan dinner Michael has prepared). I like hamburgers and hockey. And you like Moroccan food and Broadway divas.¹⁹

More than a matter of simple personality differences though, I argue that their break up speaks to the historical treatment of crossracial relationships on television where there has to be a "valid" reason why two people from different races cannot be together romantically that can serve as a proxy for race. Because of contemporary television's "post-racial" rhetoric, where race ceases to be a differentiator, there must be other "differences" that help to explain why a crossracial couple cannot be

in a relationship.²⁰ In this case, it is differences in cuisine and preferred leisure activities that mark the relationship as doomed. Exacerbating the problem is that Calvin is a college freshman and Michael is nearing the end of his graduate studies and is presumably looking for post-graduate work. These differences prove to be the undoing of Calvin and Michael's relationship. But what remains unsaid is that relationships have (and do) survive problems far more disparate than cuisine and hobbies. The underlying theme is that crossracial relationships are framed as problematic on *Greek*, a theme that is underscored with Ashleigh, who also dates white men exclusively to similarly disastrous effect.²¹

Calvin's third relationship is with Grant, a fellow member of the Omega Chi fraternity, who becomes his roommate. Unlike his relationships with either Heath or Michael, this relationship starts with Grant coming out to Calvin and continues with the subsequent sexual tension between them. Also unlike his relationships with Heath and Michael, Calvin initially tries to take things slowly with Grant so that he can get to know him before turning the relationship into a sexual one.

Once again, though, the perceived differences between Calvin and Grant end their relationship. From Calvin's perspective, Grant becomes "too gay" because he has started shaving his body hair, bleaching his hair, and whitening his teeth. By contrast, Calvin likes sports, hamburgers, and fraternity life. I argue that these differences, as with Calvin's other relationships, are coded as metaphors for racial differences. In other words, it is not that Grant and Calvin (like Michael and Calvin) cannot make the relationship work because one likes "manly" (i.e. straight) things and the other likes "gay" things, it is that they cannot make it work because their races are different. Calvin's short-lived relationships are consistent with the fact that televisual crossracial relationships tend to be constructed as transitory. In other words, the relationship is temporary and after the usually short-lived dalliance is over the character disappears.²² This construct has also been seen on shows including *Friends* and *Will & Grace* whereby "differences" help to reaffirm the impossibility of interracial relationships.²³ *Greek*, like other television shows, works to restrict and constrain

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crossracial relationships from the possibility of ongoing and long-lasting potential. In other words, when crossracial couples are depicted on television, there is little likelihood that it will last longer than a few episodes.

Conclusion: TV in Black and Gay

Calvin is a far more complex character than he appears at first glance. Calvin, like other black gay male characters before him (like Carter Heywood on *Spin City*) operating in a “race neutral” televisual world, has to carry the cultural and social baggage of being both gay and black, whether the producers and viewers of *Greek* acknowledge his dual identities or not. Calvin’s blackness is minimized when he is in situations where his gayness is emphasized (following a “race neutral” ideology). When he is in crossracial romantic relationships, however, the show emphasizes his blackness using the tropes of traditional black masculinity on television. This dynamic creates a conundrum for the viewer; depending on the episode viewed, Calvin could either be read as more “authentically” black or more “authentically” gay based on the situations in which the producers place him.

The pink elephant in the room when reading any gay or black character is typically a discussion of whether a characterization is “negative” or “positive” as it relates to the tropes of homosexuality and race/blackness used to construct characters on television. That is a fruitless discussion, however, as one person’s reading of a negative portrayal is another person’s example of seeing themselves reflected back from the television screen. Televisual representations are always-already problematic. It is impossible for one character to represent all

things to all people, particularly those who are employing Charles Cooley’s “Looking-glass Self” concept as a television viewer, which holds that perceptions of the self are created and reinforced through social interactions.²⁴

Still, reading television is important to interrogate the ways in which specific groups of people are portrayed. There is no doubt that televisual portrayals of gay men and lesbian women have come a long way from the days when homosexuality was equated with social problems including drug abuse and alcoholism. In particular, black gay men have evolved from their early portrayals as only swishy queens on *In Living Color*. Today, televisual portrayals of black gay men have begun the journey toward a diversity of representations that can reflect the spectrum of black gay men in everyday life – and Calvin is a part of that march for diversity.

Calvin represents one of the few black gay male representations on mainstream television, particularly in the “post-*Will & Grace* era,” which includes black gay representations on shows like *Noah’s Arc*, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and *Six Feet Under*. While these characters have been on subscription networks like HBO and Showtime and “gay ghetto” networks like here! and Logo, ABC Family is a trailblazer in its representation of black gay men on a mainstream cable television station. While its representation of Calvin is problematic for primarily constructing him within a “politics of respectability,” it is nonetheless significant that black gay men are being incorporated into “family-friendly” entertainment and challenging, through a mainstream cable channel, the hegemonic construction of gayness as whiteness.²⁵

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End Notes

- 1 Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 12.
- 2 Evelyn B. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 184.
- 3 "ABC Family Branding," Disney/ABC Television Group, http://www.disneyabctv.com/division/abcfamily_index.shtml (accessed December 19, 2010).
- 4 "Where We Are on TV: 2009-2010," Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, <http://www.glaad.org/tvreport10>, (accessed December 20, 2010).
- 5 Catherine Squires, *African Americans and the Media* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 219.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 85.
- 8 Ann Oldenburg, "Love is no Longer Color-coded on TV," *USA Today*, December 5, 2005. http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2005-12-20-interracial-couples_x.htm.
- 9 Darieck Scott, "Jungle Fever: Black Identity Politics, White Dick and the Utopian Bedroom," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1994): 300.
- 10 Dyer, *White*, 12.
- 11 Erica Chito Childs, *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 46.
- 12 "Liquid Courage," *Greek*. Episode no. 105 first broadcast August 6, 2007 by ABC Family.
- 13 These representations include images in music videos like Nelly's *Tip Drill*, the film *Black Dynamite* and TV characters like Kyle from *Living Single*.
- 14 Herman Gray, "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture," *Callaloo* 18 (1995): 401.
- 15 Dwight A. McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 130.
- 16 "Mister Purr-fect," *Greek*. Episode no. 118 first broadcast May 12, 2008 by ABC Family.
- 17 While cultural capital is a concept credited to Pierre Bourdieu, it is Ghassan Hage who expanded the concept to include whiteness as a form of cultural capital.
- 18 McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch*, 118.
- 19 "The Popular Vote," *Greek*. Episode no. 208 first broadcast October 14, 2008 by ABC Family.
- 20 This dynamic is currently playing out on NBC's *Parenthood* where Hattie, a 16-year old white girl is dating Alex, a 19-year old black boy. Hattie's parent's object to the relationship not because they are of different races, but because of the age difference between the two.
- 21 Ashleigh has two relationships with white men that end because of the perception of differences. In the first, it is the distance that ends the relationship (her betrothed lives in Providence, RI, while she is in Cypress, OH) and in the second relationship, it is because her boyfriend moves "back home." Although there were issues of fidelity in the second relationship, they were trying to work it out until he decided to move back home.
- 22 The exception here is Heath. While he remained on the show and has dated other white men, as the show begins its final season, Heath and Calvin are dating again, which could alter the analysis given here.
- 23 On *Friends*, Aisha Tyler plays Charlie, Ross's love interest. The relationship ends because Ross values an impending grant award more than he does his black girlfriend. Ross resumes dating white women and ends up dating Rachel as the show ends. On *Will & Grace*, Taye Diggs plays James, the love interest of Will Truman for a four-episode arc. When the relationship ends, Will goes back to dating white men and ends the series living happily ever after with Vince, a white man. Notable exceptions include *The Jeffersons*, the short-lived *True Colors*, and *Parenthood* for heterosexual couples (*Parenthood* currently has two crossracial relationships – one an adult relationship and one a relationship between teenagers, as discussed previously); and *Six Feet Under* for gay couples.
- 24 Charles H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902).
- 25 Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 184.