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**Black In America:  
CNN, and the Art of Opportunism (Part 2)  
The Substance of Truth  
By Tolu Olorunda  
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*"Acknowledging the educational role of... films requires that educators and others find ways to... develop a pedagogy of disruption that would attempt to make students and others more attentive to visual and popular culture as an important site of political and pedagogical struggle. Such a pedagogy would raise questions regarding how certain meanings under particular historical conditions become more legitimate as representations of the real than others... and go relatively unchallenged in shaping a broader set of discourses and social configurations."*

**-Giroux, Henry. [Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism \(Culture and Politics\)](#). New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 79.**

On July 23 and July 24, 2008 CNN aired a documentary titled, "Black In America," hosted by correspondent Soledad O'Brien. The first night focused on "The Black Woman & Family," and the second "The Black Man." (No family?) Through a powerful media blitzkrieg campaign, it became one of cable's most-watched specials. The two-night series averaged 2.3 million viewers. By all accounts, it was a commercial success.

But while many Black homes had their television sets tuned to the frequency of Cable Network News, I was out on a long walk, convinced that I wasn't missing out on anything. To date, I have yet to see the documentary, but I've heard enough on Black

talk radio, and read enough on Black commentary websites, to confirm my contention - long-held before July 23, 2008 - that CNN, of all stations, was/is [least qualified](#) to render an impressive account of what Black Life on these shores constitutes.

On July 22, 2008 I [wrote an article](#), "Black in America: CNN, and the Art of Opportunism," which stated in full-length what Black viewers were to expect of the much-hyped special. CNN's attempt to enlighten "all of America" about the realities of being "Black In America" failed to excite me. "I'm not buying it," I wrote. At best, I was convinced, CNN was engaging in "*quid pro quo*."

Among other reasons to laugh-off CNN's silly adventure, I listed the following:

The same network which, at the time, employed conservative loud-mouth Glenn Beck - a guy who once questioned Congressman Keith Ellison's patriotism, demanding of him: "Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies" - was unworthy of the kind of temporary partnership it proposed to the Black mass.

The same network which still puts on its air Lou Dobbs - a known xenophobe who has, in the past, erroneously accused Mexican immigrants of bringing across the borders "highly contagious diseases" (such as leprosy), featured White supremacists on his show (one in particular describes Blacks as a "retrograde species of humanity"), and gone so far as referring to then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as a "cotton-pic[ker] - could not be counted on to present an accurate portrayal of Black life.

The same network which once "provided a platform" to Republican strategist Pat Buchanan - fittingly described, by PBS journalist Tavis Smiley, as a "racial arsonist," for his many disturbing conducts, such as anointing Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "one of the most divisive men" in history, defending Radio shock-jock Don Imus as "more a victim of hatred than a perpetrator" of it, writing last year that "no people anywhere has done more to lift up blacks than white Americans," and insisting that only White males died in the 1944 battle of Normandy - should be more concerned with its integrity than what life for Black Americans is like.

CNN's experiment, I suggested, had only one objective in mind - ratings. BIG RATINGS! "Is CNN attempting to cash in on the present unrest [in] the Black Community, or do they have a sincere interest in [presenting] solutions to the many problems [inflicting] terror upon Black folks?" I wondered. Judging by the blockbuster success it enjoyed, the question was answered shortly thereafter.

Days after the documentary aired, I listened to a number of reputable Black talk radio shows, including WVON's "The Santita Jackson Show," and Siriux/XM's "Make It Plain with Mark Thompson", wondering what the official response from Black America was. To my comfort, there seemed to be an 80%-20% consensus, with the majority articulating their disgust at the shallowness of CNN's investigative report. Pathological stereotypes of laziness, irresponsibility, and incivility, which had long defined Blackness in mass media, were resurrected in the documentary, they complained. Many of those who saw no wrong in CNN's documentary weren't so much as thrilled, but rather

amused that Black viewers actually expected a candid account about the hell they catch, from a multi-billion-dollar News organization. They seemed more unimpressed with the gullibility of the Black callers than with CNN.

By and large, the feeling was just as mutual in the Black blogosphere.

Finalcall.com senior correspondent, Askia Muhammad, offered one of the [clearest analyses](#) at the moment. "Each segment was introduced by what seemed like a BET or MTV-wannabe," she wrote. "A young man spoke during segment transitions in faux-rhymes, as if to only slightly suggest a muted, and very toned-down hip hop artist, articulating his message rather than rapping it." CNN's docu-drama wasn't interested in substance, she contended: "It was theater, meets journalism, meets reality-TV, all in one." She echoed sentiments voiced by others who claimed it made no special mark, and failed to transcend the one-dimensional understanding of the African American experience mainstream press has promoted for centuries: "CNN invested a lot of money and resources into 'tweaking' the history of Black Men in America during the last 40 years to more resemble a series of unfortunate circumstances for some Black men, while others - who were willing to 'act White' and pursue educational opportunities - were able to 'make it' by getting nice jobs, nice cars, and nice homes in nice integrated neighborhoods."

"Black In America" was confirmed as a moral disaster. The commentators understood that it was never meant to conduct a serious look at the fragile quality of life Black folks have had to settle for, since traveling those many months, and many miles, on slave ships. CNN's hunger for ratings was as apparent as the journalistic laziness many expressed disappointment by. But CNN could be less bothered, for it achieved the goal it set forth for. Millions of people tuned in, Black and White, rich and poor, fascinated by the tricks CNN had promised were packed up its sleeves.

For this reason, it should surprise no one that CNN has scheduled a second installment of the series, "Black In America 2," set for July 22 and 23, 2009. This time, we are to sit back and watch CNN explore "Black in America: Today's Pioneers," and "Black in America: Tomorrow's Leaders."

As expected, the town cries [have already begun](#), but CNN isn't listening. The same Black bloggers and critics who stood up in horror this time last year, are left clueless as to why CNN decided to renew a series which received so much negative review from the very people it sought to appease.

19th century philosopher Henry David Thoreau once wrote that the media is "almost, without exception, corrupt." That's one way of looking at it. It is also true that the pain and agony of Black struggle is only relevant to mass media when marketable for commercial gain. Those whose livelihood is trapped under the incessant surveillance of White supremacy, prejudice, discrimination, and bigotry don't need to be told what it means to be "Black In America." They *are* it. So, clearly, the documentary wasn't *meant* for Black audiences.

Like Minstrel shows of the 1800s, it was suited for the delight of Whites who remain convinced that Blacks have the world handed to them, and simply refuse to "pull themselves up by their bootstrap." It wasn't meant to correct this assumption; rather

sustain it. By celebrating the efforts of Dr. Roland Fryer, the conservative Harvard economist who engages in practices that come as close to child labor as legally permissible (paying young student to *do well* on tests), those Whites are blinded to the [larger realities](#) of *urban* education - insufficient funding, dilapidated buildings, militarized policies, student-criminalization, etc.

And while it might help to scream out loud, write letters to the CNN headquarters, organize boycotts of the station, and protest with more fury than hell harbors, the greater good will only come when we live out lives that refute the lies told by Ms. O'Brien and company.


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