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From Symbolic Obscurity to Cultural Visibility? African Immigrants on U.S. Television and the Ambivalence of Nigerians on American Sitcom

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Bob Hearts Abishola, a sitcom with a major Nigerian character, premiered on the American CBS network in 2019. This marks an important moment in the representation of African immigrants in the U.S. entertainment media. African immigrants in the United States experience symbolic obscurity because of their absence in media narratives and the ridicule or trivialization in their representation when stories about them are presented. This study examines the cultural relevance of this sitcom and its reception. Through analysis of introductory episodes of the show, interviews with Nigerian immigrants in the United States, and a study of social media responses to the sitcom, this study reveals the nature of cultural visibility the sitcom provides Nigerian immigrants. At the same time, the show also presents the consequence of ambivalence of media representation in the representation of African Americans, which inadvertently brings the friction in the U.S. Black community to the fore.

Keywords: Nigeria, sitcom, American television, African immigrants, media representation

Africa and Africans are mostly absent on U.S. television. When stories are presented about Africa, Americans are more likely to see negative representation of Africa than positive ones (Blakley, Rogers, Watson-Currie, & Jung, 2019; Cupples & Glynn, 2013). Combing through almost 700,000 hours of a month of U.S. television news, entertainment programming, and commercials, Blakley et al. (2019) reiterate the critique that Africa and Africans are rarely mentioned in the U.S. media. The study shows that only 13% of storylines that feature Africa in entertainment content actually included an African character, 46% of them spoke 10 words or fewer, and only 31% of African characters were women. Steeves (2008) also observes that African representation in the U.S. media reveals not only erasure but also equally the absence of Africans as creators and voices of their representation. Given this background, *Bob Hearts Abishola* (Lorre, Yashere, Gorodetsky, & Higgins, 2019–2023) thus becomes an important event in the U.S. entertainment media.

Bob Hearts Abishola (*BHA*; Lorre et al., 2019–2023) premiered on September 23, 2019, on the CBS network in the United States. It is a sitcom about the relationship between Bob, a middle-aged White male, and Abishola, an immigrant Nigerian nurse. A series of events unfold around Bob's attempt to

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convince Abishola of his romantic interest in her. The dramatic events are elaborated by the social conflicts and contrasting elements of the plot. The experience of a Nigerian immigrant family typified by Abishola, who lives with her son and her extended family—her aunt and her husband—is contrasted with the successful White business family of Bob, with his siblings and mother. The show was created and produced by Chuck Lorre, a successful TV producer, and supported by other producers, including Gina Yashere, a British-Nigerian immigrant, who also acts as Abishola's friend and coworker. Lorre notes the idea of the show is based on the goal of presenting the hard work of immigrants in the United States and their many contributions to the American economy and culture (Sarmiento, 2019).

There are particular contexts that the show operates in: first, the show opened during a tense period of anti-immigrant contestations in the United States, spurred by criticism of Donald Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric, starting with a reference to immigrants and crime during the launch of his presidential campaign. Some of his policies have been directed at Black immigrants; he was allegedly reported asking "why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here" in reference to immigrants from the Caribbean and African countries (Kendi, 2019, para. 2). Second, the show runs in a media culture where stories about Africa and Africans are scant and are often negative, with limited appearance of African characters in storylines featuring Africa. If they do appear, they speak few words, and very few African characters are women. Bearing this in mind, *BHA* (Lorre et al., 2019–2023) with a Nigerian woman as a main character occupies a trailblazing position in American television culture. All these inspire critical thoughts that influence the following research questions that guide this current inquiry: (1) How do the early episodes of the show address African (in)visibility and representation in U.S. media? (2) How do the American audience broadly, and the African American audience specifically, receive and react to the show? (3) What were the expectations of Nigerian immigrants in the United States from the show and their reactions to it? The interest in African Americans' reactions to the show was to examine how the cultural schism between the African American community and the African immigrant community, discussed below, influence the response to the show.

U.S. Media Representation of Africa

Over four decades ago, Segal (1976) observed that Africa was seldom considered newsworthy by media executives who decided what went into a daily paper, weekly magazine, or evening news TV slot. Although radio has mostly ignored Africa, American TV has done it outright harm with content that present the African jungle, wildlife, and a natural state narrative that contrasts an Africa of Black servility and White sensuality. Recently, drawing evidence from the 2014 Ebola outbreak and its coverage in the media, Monson (2017) argues the American Ebola narrative harks back to stereotypical tropes of Africa is diseased stereotype, which led to the othering and stigmatization of Africans living in the United States. These representations are the thrusts of the critique of Western media's African coverage, where Western news and aid agencies reproduce the colonial tropes of Africa as a "dark continent" with negative iconography as a chaotic region with famine, disease, war, and instability. This iconography is amplified with images of a starving child with a swollen belly and a displaced, forlorn mother in need of aid and assistance (Cupples & Glynn, 2013). The culmination of these negative imageries is the perception created in the minds of many Americans and of those in the broader Western nations who have never visited

Africa and who find it hard to believe that any good ever happens on the continent (Cupples & Glynn, 2013).

On the contrary, Scott (2017) argues that the reports of negative representation of Africa are mostly generalized, and Nothias (2018) concurs that the dominant claim about Western negative coverage of Africa is not empirically supported. Irrespective of these dissenting views, there are evidences of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Africa in the U.S. media. Kalyango and Onyebadi's (2012) content analysis study of coverage of Africa by U.S. television networks over a 30-year period shows a steady decrease in African coverage compared with coverage of other regions, and the primary enticements for covering Africa are crises, civil wars, terrorisms, and health pandemics. Steeves (2008) observes that African representation on three reality television programs on U.S. network resonate in many ways to prior colonial and imperial narratives. Encounters with Africa and Africans are mostly distant, homogenized, occasionally racist, and rarely reveal Africans' agency or voice.

African Immigrants and African Americans in the United States

Stereotypical representations of Africa in the media impact some African Americans' perceptions of Africa and African immigrants, resulting in social distancing between African Americans and African immigrants from each other. African immigrants and African Americans do not form a single Black community, Africans perceive themselves as immigrants adopting to a new society and often define their communities based on countries of origin, ethnicity, religion, and language. Although some African Americans tend to connect to African roots and identity, many dissociate themselves from their African roots, and some relate to Africans as largely a group from underdeveloped countries, and hence less urbane (Bondarenko, 2015).

African immigrants are relatively successful in the United States; they tend to have higher educational qualifications than native-born Americans (Echeverria-Estrada & Batalova, 2019). In 2017, about 40% of sub-Saharan Africans of 25 years and older held a bachelor's degree or higher (with one in three in science, technology, engineering, and math), compared with 31% of total foreign-born population and 32% of U.S.-born population (Echeverria-Estrada & Batalova, 2019). About 3 of every 10 (30%) employed African immigrants worked in the healthcare and social services sector, which means they were more than twice as likely as the U.S. working population overall to hold jobs in this area (*New American Economy*, 2018). However, as a form of covert racist narratives, there have been media reports of Black/African immigrant successes compared with African American shortcomings, often phrased around the question of why Black immigrants do so much better than Blacks who are born in the United States. This narrative draws on ethnicity in reinforcing a racist view and racialist myth of African American cultural inferiority (Pierre, 2004). Some African Americans believe that African immigrants have a sense of superiority and tend to look down on African Americans (Nsangou & Dundes, 2018). Many Africans see African Americans as a distinctly American group with no common relatable cultural connections.

The presence of Africans in positions that should enhance African American visibility is also contentious. To address diversity and inclusion of minorities, colleges have admitted many African immigrants. Massey, Mooney, Torres, and Charles (2007) note that Black immigrants are overrepresented

at elite academic institutions. Among Black students attending Ivy League colleges, 41% were of immigrant origin, with immigrants from Nigeria and Ghana making the largest contribution from Africa. Actors of African descent have been cast in some major movies that tell African American stories. The casting of Cynthia Orivo, a Nigerian-British actress, as the iconic Harriet Tubman in *Harriet* (Lemmons & Howard, 2019) brought the African and African American cultural tension to the fore with an online appeal demanding that an African American should be cast in this important movie. All these have contributed to a cultural schism between Africans and Africa Americans.

Nigerian Immigrants in the United States

Nigerian immigrants are the largest group of African immigrants in the United States (Anderson, 2017). They are the most educated of sub-Saharan African immigrants and one of the most educated groups in the United States. About 61% of people with Nigerian ancestry 25 years and older had a bachelor's degree or higher, which is more than twice the U.S. rate of 28.5% (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Households headed by a Nigerian had a slightly higher median income of about $52,000 than U.S. households overall of $50,000 (*Migration Policy Institute* [MPI], 2015). The United States generally attracts highly skilled African immigrants, as such, about 59% of Nigeria's high-skilled immigrants make the United States their destination (Capps, McCabe, & Fix, 2012). They are more likely to be employed in medical, management, business, science, and arts occupations (Echeverria-Estrada & Batalova, 2019).

Parallel to this successful image of Nigerians is the representation of a people from a corrupt nation who are perceived as scammers and fraudsters. Typical in the Nigerian criminal representation are reports of notoriety for online advanced fee fraud, e-mail scams, identity theft, Nigerian prince scams, and Nigerian romance scams among many reported cases in the U.S. media (see Schlesinger & Day, 2017). For decades, the image of Nigeria and Nigerians as corrupt has existed in the American media. For example, there was a 1995 story about Nigeria entitled "Corruption, Inc." in the U.S. television news magazine, *60 Minutes* (Smith, 2008). Adegbola, Skarda-Mitchell, and Gearhart (2018) examined television news coverage of Nigeria appearing on U.S. broadcast networks and revealed that presentation of crime in news stories remained the most reported issue.

During his presidency, Donald Trump had reportedly complained that Nigerian immigrants would never "go back to their huts" once they come to the United States (Shear & Davis, 2017, para. 7). Effectively, the Trump administration banned immigration from Nigeria (the largest Black nation in the world) and other African countries such as Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, and Tanzania. McKanders (2019) notes the racist undertone of the ban, "the ultimate goal is to shape what America looks like and prevent the blackening and browning of America" (p. 3). Having a sitcom on a U.S. national television representing Nigerian immigrants as depicted in *BHA* (Lorre et al., 2019–2023) definitely strikes a political tone. In addition, the symbolic obscurity of African immigrants in the U.S. media and their negative representation make *BHA* an essential cultural moment in the U.S. media landscape.

Symbolic Annihilation and the Postcolonial Realities

The absence of African immigrants and their negative representation when present in the U.S. media illustrate the relevance of symbolic annihilation in media analyses of group representation. George Gerbner (1972) introduced the concept to describe the absence of a group in the media. Noting that representation in the fictional world or in cultural spaces, such as the media, signifies social existence, the trivialization, ridicule, condemnation, and absence means symbolic annihilation of that group. Absence or negative representation in the media can contribute to social disempowerment and erase groups from public consciousness. A way of challenging the symbolic annihilation of African immigrants in the U.S. media is to center an appropriate representation, not only in stories written about them but also through stories told by them.

A postcolonial lens is equally relevant in engaging media representation of immigrants, the previously colonized, and those from the Global South in Western cultural spaces. The realities of people of African descent in the United States are shaped by postcolonial experiences. First, the absence of a unified Blackness in the United States is a result of the cultural separateness of Africa Americans from Africa through colonial slavery and the creation of an authentic cultural identity by African Americans through their experiences of survival, innovations, and creativities in the realities of their existence in the United States. Second, many African immigrants tend to construct their identities based on their countries of origin in Africa. As such, they hold to national identities that are defined by colonial border demarcations of countries within Africa.

Because the postcolonial is connected to migration, displacement, modernity, capitalism, and hybridity, it is relevant to this current critique. The postcolonial global neoliberal economic system and political interventions in the Global South have contributed to economic and political migrations to the West. The previously colonized have also been seduced by the allure of Western culture, modernity, and capital, not only for themselves but also for their families back in their home countries.

The postcolonial immigrants are hybrid bodies, performing hybrid cultures in hybrid spaces. These spaces relate to what Bhabha (1994) refers to as the "third space of enunciation" (p. 37). It is an in-between space of mixing of cultures, "based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*" (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 37–38; emphasis in original). The hybridity of postcolonial immigrant experience is visible in how they hold on to their cultures in Western spaces but also strive to perform these cultures sensibly and pleasurably to the Western onlookers for self-representation. They equally embrace Western cultures in realization of hybrid, modern, and urbane bodies in Western spaces. As Kraidy (2005) observes, media production is a key focus of diasporic media research, which includes analysis of the practices involved in producing media programs for migrant communities. Access to media production provides opportunities for immigrants to employ their creative agencies in attempts to confront their symbolic annihilation in cultural productions.

Methodology

The data collected for this study were aimed at understanding how the introductory episodes of *BHA* (Lorre et al., 2019–2023) address African immigrant media visibility, specifically Nigerian immigrant representation. The data would also reveal the reactions of Nigerian immigrants and American audiences—particularly African American audiences—to the show, and what all these mean for media representation. Pilot and introductory episodes of television shows are important; they typically introduce and establish the plot, the setting of a show, and the characters and their world. Introductory episodes seek to attract viewers and give them a reason to come back. Critically, the reactions of viewers to initial episodes may also influence the future development of the storyline. As such, the analysis in this study covers the introductory six episodes of the first season of *BHA*. It has been shown that viewers tend to get "hooked" on a show, not only from the pilot episode but also the initial episodes with the average around the fourth episode (Lopez, 2015).

To examine how the show addresses African immigrant visibility in the U.S. media through Nigerian immigrant representations, I conducted a textual analysis of the first six episodes of the show. This analysis allows me to examine meanings of actions, symbols, and messages on the show in relation to issues of representation and cultural visibility of Nigerian immigrants within the American social and cultural landscapes.

To examine reactions of the American audience broadly, and the African American audience specifically, I conducted a digital ethnography involving nonparticipatory observations of reactions and comments to the show. These reactions were comments and postings to a story about the show on social media. The National Public Radio posted a story about the show on its Twitter page and cross-posted it on its Facebook page (National Public Radio [NPR], 2019a, 2019b). The story highlights that the "show is definitely an exceptional moment in U.S. television" (Sarmiento, 2019, para. 6). I followed the comments of followers of NPR on both its Twitter and Facebook pages for four months, making notes and recording observations. Nearly all the comments were direct reactions to the show and not the NPR story. There were 764 comments about the show from both social media platforms at the end of my observation, 613 comments on Facebook and 151 on Twitter. These comments were eventually downloaded as data for thematic analysis.

To explore the expectations and immediate reactions of Nigerian immigrants in the United States to the show, I visited the Nigerian Consulate in New York City for two days and randomly approached Nigerians visiting the consulate. Through this convenience sampling, five people confirmed they had watched some of the introductory episodes, and they volunteered for in-depth interviews. There were four other respondents comprising of a group of Nigerian immigrants I identified through snowball recommendations from a Nigerian relative. They responded to the same questions as I asked in the interviews, but through an online, self-administered open-ended survey format.

The analyses of the data involved a three-phase process of thematic analysis. In the first phase, I conducted a line-by-line reading and coding of the data. This step allowed for a streamlining of the data, by reading the transcribed data, the Facebook posts, and comments and each tweet line-by-line, I was

able to summarize the data by identifying short descriptive codes or phrases that describe relevant content of the data without interpretation or allocating abstract terms or concepts. From this initial coding process, I could deduce that the reactions to the initial episodes of the show were celebratory, critical, and antagonistic.

In the second phase of the analysis, I located similar and overlapping codes and phrases from the initial line-by-line coding; this allowed me to identify relationships and divergence in the initial codes. Similar and related codes were combined into broader categories of codes. At this point, a clearer pattern of opinions began to emerge between those who are clearly critical of the show and those with positive reactions to the show. Codes such as "disrespectful, denigrating, racism," and "protest" began to emerge as thematic reactions from those critical of the show, while categories of codes, such as "refreshing, identity, culture," and "entertaining" began to emerge on a second spectrum of themes with positive reactions to the show. In the third phase of the analysis, I synthesized the categories of codes into overarching analytic classifications précised into two broad themes: "centering visibility" and the "ambivalence of media representation."

Centering Visibility

The theme of "centering visibility" reflects how this show contributes to bringing to the American popular cultural sphere, through entertainment television, the visibility of Nigerian immigrants in the United States. This is achieved in four ways: voice and agency, identity assertion, performing culture, and immigrant representation.

Voice and Agency

Voice and agency here relate to the ability and opportunity to tell and represent one's story. Considering that African immigrants' voices are mostly unheard in stories about them (Desmares, 2017), this show tends to provide immigrant visibility in crafting their own representation in the media. One way this is reflected is in the agency of Gina Yashere, the British immigrant of Nigerian descent, who is a cocreator, coproducer, and cowriter of the show. Because representation in the media is often located in the power to create imagery of people and events, the creative agency that writers have is essential in studying representation. Gina Yashere does have an opportunity to craft stories that contrast the negative imagery of Africa and Africans in the U.S. media while presenting this pleasurably to the sensibility of the American onlookers. She has to negotiate this with a comedic tone the show genre requires. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2003) argue that agency is important essentially because it points to "the ability of postcolonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power" (p. 8), such as the power of representing the postcolonial subjects in Western cultural spaces.

The use of music from a Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria as the theme music of the show also adds to the attempt at striving for authentic representation. The music is from a compilation entitled *Nigerian Beats* (Akingbola, 2013), created and performed by Sola Akingbola, a British-Nigerian artist and member of the band Jamiroquai. *BHA* (Lorre et al., 2019–2023) also contributes to visibility that challenges the erasure and underrepresentation of African immigrants in entertainment content.

Abishola as a main character in the show is played by a Nigerian immigrant. This is important, considering the limited appearances of African characters in storylines that feature Africa in entertainment content on American TV, the underrepresentation of immigrants in media coverage, and that immigrant voices are mostly unheard in stories about them (Desmares, 2017). The depiction of her career as a nurse also reflects an authentic profile of immigrant, as data show about 3 of every 10 employed African immigrants work in healthcare and social services (*New American Economy*, 2018). Apart from the character of Abishola, there are about five other characters in the show played by immigrants of Nigerian descent. For the Nigerian immigrants interviewed, they generally like the representation and visibility presented in the introductory episodes. One stated:

> I will just say I like the representation, it's always nice when you can see yourself on TV, that's around you and represented correctly, not just as a scammer or anything negative or as a Nigerian prince, if you know the going joke in the media.

Another noted, "I see there are a lot of Nigerians in the United States now, so it is good that we finally see each other on TV and we are able to relate to what we see on TV." For others, the visibility the show offers is a teachable opportunity, because as another Nigerian immigrant noted, "I like the show. It helps me to teach my children and American friends a few things about us." As Bloemraad, Graauw, and Hamlin (2015) note, the tone of media coverage is an essential measure of immigrant visibility.

Identity Assertion

This level of visibility enhances a sense of identity assertion for Nigerian immigrants in the United States, and by extension, African immigrants who find affinity with the characters in a way that centers recognition of their existence in the United States. This sense of affinity is captured in the expectations and reactions of Nigerian immigrants to the show. They felt it was very good Nigerians are getting representation in the U.S. media; they like the initial episodes of the show because, as one Nigerian explained, it captures "an authentic representation of what a Nigerian immigrant's life is like here." Another Nigerian immigrant explained,

> That it is not an African American or just a Black person playing a Nigerian immigrant, this person seems to really have a Nigerian accent and there are Nigerian insider jokes . . . and the family dynamics of a Nigerian person, that's what's authentic that I like.

The sense of identity for Nigerian immigrants highlighted with Abishola maintaining her Nigerian accent is not trivial. Consider that accent has been a social concern of many immigrants, not only because it is used as a stereotypical tease but also for negative social discrimination. This relates to the recognition of varieties of English accents in the United States, in what Orelus (2021) calls an anticolonial act that subverts linguistic imperialism of the hegemony of British and American English accent.

Another Nigerian immigrant noted, "when I first saw it, I really liked it because it's different, you know. It's good to see somebody from Nigeria on TV representing the country." For a respondent with "initial pessimism about likely lackluster outcome for lack of involvement of proud and knowledgeable

Yorubas," his initial concern was allayed by the "impressive cast of seasoned characters," which demonstrates the TV network's "commitment to the success of the show."

Performing Culture

The visibility is also reflected in a third way through performance of culture. In performing culture, the immigrant characters speak Yoruba language, sing Yoruba songs, make references to ethnic foods, and dress up in African fashion. However, these performances are carefully presented in a way that is not overwhelming to the Western onlookers. Take Abishola singing a Yoruba lullaby to Bob, or how her family is adorned in the popular African-styled clothing, while her friend styles her hair in a Nigerian "Shuku" style on her first date with Bob. If, as Dosekun (2016) asserts, any Black hairstyle is performative, Abishola's hairstyle here reflects a performativity of what Oyedemi (2016) proposes, that African women in the media should proudly wear African hairstyles to contest the hegemony of straightened hair on Black women (see Figure 1).

"Performing culture" talks to the hybridity of the immigrant postcolonial African body that longs for the home culture in Western spaces but has to assert this culture and perform it pleasurably and carefully to the Western onlooker to avoid exoticization and "othering." For immigrant Nigerians, the show provides opportunity for cultural relevance and education. As one reaction on Twitter reads, "It's a great show. My children are learning the African culture and asking questions about how I grew up" (Fajolu, 2019). For American viewers, it provides a window to this culture. As a commenter on Facebook notes, "I have a number of friends from different African cultures. I love seeing a TV show that reflects some authentic African culture and not the usual stereotypes" (Messner, 2019). Another post on Facebook, most likely from a White individual based on the profile picture, reads,

> I have to admit, it brought me to tears. I couldn't tell you why, but after delving into USC's library of Yoruba lullabies, one thing is true for them: they are gentle, effective and nurturing, like nothing I've heard. We (I) need more. (Levy, 2019)

This performance of culture meets some expectations of Nigerian immigrants; one stated during the interview, "I would like to see more culture being represented. So, I would like to see more of our music, more of our dancing, more of our wedding, more about traditional aspects about culture." This yearning goes beyond immigrants' desire for cultural presence; it relates to recognition in the hybrid American cultural spaces. As Balaton-Chrimes and Stead (2017) note, "recognition has thus become a powerful norm through which alterity can be managed" (p. 7).

Figure 1. Abishola's Aunt and her husband dress up in African-styled fashion to welcome Bob as he takes Abishola on a date (Lorre, Higgins, Goetsch, Yashere, & McCarthy-Miller, 2019, 9:15).

Immigrant Representation

According to the producers, the show was meant to project immigrant visibility and showcase their hard work and contribution to the American economy and culture (Sarmiento, 2019). However, the commenters barely thought so about the introductory episodes of the show. There was no comment about immigrant experience on Twitter responses, and there were extremely few comments about immigrant contribution in the Facebook comments. The Nigerian immigrants, on the other hand, expected the show to represent them as "hardworking people" and that being in the United States creates a situation where "hard work meets opportunity." One respondent anticipated the show would reflect how hard it is for immigrants to secure permits and citizenship, and to adapt to the United States from their cultural upbringing in Nigeria. But beyond the obvious narrative of an immigrant nurse as a romantic interest of a middle-class American and the cultural differences that ensue, few incidences in the early episodes relate to essential immigrant issues.

A critical scene touches on issues of immigration, race, and minority experiences. In episode six, Abishola recounts to Bob her experience in the United States in relation to her upbringing in Nigeria. She says, "Here in America, I'm Black, . . . In Nigeria I never thought about the color of my skin . . . here every time I walk out of the door, I'm continually reminded that I'm a Black woman," to which Bob replies, "I never thought of it that way" (Lorre, Goetsch, et al., 2019, 1:05). Abishola is, however, not a regular immigrant; she is presented as a professional nurse, an elitist immigrant who has migrated to major cities of Cape Town and London before ending up in the United States.

Despite a lack of many engagements with the immigrant representation in the social media responses, there are two comments on Facebook that acknowledge the recognition, uniqueness, and visibility of this African immigrant in the American television imaginings. But the comment relates to

their visibility on U.S. television, rather than their hardworking contribution to American life. One of the comments states:

> How many Nigerian immigrants are main characters on a TV show? How many immigrants? There was a time when you saw many characters on TV who were immigrants, but it doesn't seem to be the case anymore. Of course, those immigrants were often portrayed as comical because of their accents, gaffes related to being in a new culture . . . Abishola is competent and extremely confident—a fresh representation of an immigrant to the US on TV. (Michelle, 2019)

Ambivalence of Media Representation

Another major theme that emerged is what I refer to as ambivalence of representation. The attempt to address negative representations in the media may have the intended consequence of correcting stereotypical representation, but it may unintentionally perpetuate the negative representation or create a new form of representation. The comedy genre provides an artistic tool to address negative stereotypes in a subtle, amusing way, but equally viewers may avoid suspension of disbelief, ignore the comedic ambience, or perceive it as a disguise to perpetuate the stereotypes—hence the ambivalence of media representation. This ambivalence evokes what Abrahams (2020) refers to as "trust," in which what the audience can understand the humorist to intend is limited by what they believe the humorist is capable of intending. That is, even if the comedic act is accepted as joking, there may be questions about what the comedian intends and what he or she might be trusted to intend, especially with jokes about marginalized groups. The ambivalence of representation is seen in two ways in this study, through a critique of the show as being disrespectful to African Americans and through instances of caricatured representation of Nigerians.

Disrespecting and Denigrating African Americans

The major criticism of the early episodes of *BHA* (Lorre et al., 2019–2023) is that the show is considered disrespectful to African Americans. Confronting stereotypes and social frictions within the American Black community seems to be important to the producers, as it was brought up in the early episodes. There are two scenes that stand out in this case: the first is in episode 1 and the other in episode 3. In the first scene, Abishola is in the principal's office to discuss a fight between her son and another student, an African American, who had referred to Abishola's son as a "jungle bitch" (Lorre, Gorodetsky, et al., 2019, 14:00). This scene is critical in presenting the experience of African immigrant children in American schools. As Mthetwa-Sommers and Harushimana (2016) note, many K–12 teachers and students have teased African immigrant students about "experiences with hunger, living in the jungle, eating with lions etc." (p. 19). These negative stereotypes are derived from colonialist narratives about Africa and the perpetuation of these imageries in the media.

The argument between Abishola and the African American mother in the principal's office leads to Abishola arguing why her son, "who is a straight A student" should not be suspended and saying to the African American mother "one of these two boys is going to be a doctor, and I'll give you a clue: It's not your Calvin"

(Lorre, Gorodetsky, et al., 2019, 14:55). Although this uncomfortable scene tries to confront the racist stereotype of comparing African immigrants' and African Americans' achievements, often phrased in media reports and private conversations about Black immigrants doing much better than native-born Black Americans, and Black immigrants being overrepresented in Ivy League colleges (Massey et al., 2007; Pierre, 2004), it may have inadvertently exacerbated the stereotypes and social friction in the Black community.

The other scene that draws criticisms about disrespecting and denigrating African Americans is in episode 3. Abishola and two coworkers (a Nigerian immigrant and an African American) are having lunch, and their discussion leads to talks about characteristic preferences in a husband. Here, the two Nigerian immigrants discuss a ranking system of preferences: "Nigerian man (of) same tribe—Yoruba, then Nigerian [of] different tribe—Igbo, then other Africans—except Tunisians and Egyptians, then Caribbean, then Whites, then African American" (Lorre, Higgins, Yashere, & McCarthy-Miller, 2019, 5:07). In response to this hierarchy, Gloria, the African American coworker, retorts, "Wait! So a Black man is last on your list, below a White man? . . . All you Africans think you are better than us" (Lorre, Yashere, et al., 2019, 5:26). The discussion then segues to the perception of African Americans, described by these two Nigerian immigrants as "Gang bangers and baby mamas" as presented in the media, especially "Fox News, which is fair and balanced," a sarcastic twist of the motto of Fox News network (Lorre, Yashere, et al., 2019, 5:26). Gloria then responds, "Next time I get an email from a Nigerian prince, you want me to assume it's one of you heifers trying to scam me?" (Lorre, Yashere, et al., 2019, 5:26). A pointed warning against generalizing negative stereotypes.

Studies have shown there is a preferential system of male partnership in African immigrant community. Imoagene (2019) notes that many Nigerian parents dissuade their children from befriending African American children from poor and working-class backgrounds. Abdi (2020), in her autoethnographic study, recounts how, shortly after her arrival in the United States, a male cousin said to her, "Now be aware not to marry a madow (Black man) and bring shame to my uncle's household" (p. 5). As a female Somalian married to an African American, Abdi (2020) recounts further:

> I knew within the Somali community, marrying madow or Black man, is a dishonorable act and is considered worse than marrying gaal, a white man (and usually Christian). At the time, I was a bit surprised it was coming from a person who lived in the US for over two decades. (p. 5)

Abdi's (2020) account evidences the African immigrants' perception of an African American male, which the interaction in the scene tries to highlight.

In the same scene, Gloria strives for a unified blackness, noting that, to White people, "We all look the same," and for emphasis, she notes, if pulled over by the police, they will only see the Black skin, not the ethnic ranking differences (Lorre, Yashere, et al., 2019, 6:21). To which Kemi, the Nigerian coworker (played by Gina Yashere) retorts, "We won't get pulled over, we obey the traffic laws" (Lorre, Yashere, et al., 2019, 6:21). Although scripted for comedic chuckle and possibly to address the stereotypical perceptions in the African immigrant community, this retort plays on a stereotypical representation of African Americans and the police. Considering the numerous violent encounters of the

police with African Americans, this statement lacks sensitivity to these events and tends to recriminalize African Americans as the guilty party in all police encounters.

Figure 2. Husband Preference: Gloria pointedly confronts Abishola (center) and Kemi on their husband ranking that locates African American male at the bottom (Lorre, Yashere, et al., 2019, 5:27).

If the scripting of these scenes was to confront the media representation, cultural stereotypes, and social conflicts in the Black community, the reactions to these by many viewers were extremely critical. The two scenes incur strong reactions on Facebook and Twitter from viewers who tend to be mostly African Americans (based on their profile pictures and their use of "we" in reference to African Americans). The reaction in general is that the show, specifically in the early episodes, is disrespectful and denigrating to African Americans. Readings of reactions to the sitcom reveal that many commenters ignore the comedic ambience or perceive it as a disguise to perpetuate African American stereotypes. For example, a comment reads: "This is a horrible show. It uses Nigerian immigrants to disrespect Black Americans" (ADOS QPQV, 2019). A viewer observes, "When I watched the show, I saw recurring themes of disrespect towards those on the Black American community" (Hayden, 2019). Another comment reads, "This show is bigoted and anti-ADOS [American Descendant of Slavery]. The Nigerian character and writer, Gina Yashere, perpetuates negative tropes about #ADOS people" (Toni, 2019). One African American woman is quite forceful about her criticism:

> Why? Because we don't get enough racial hatred? Division is funny? I felt sick to my stomach that people really think it's genuinely funny for one black woman to tell another, your child won't amount to anything. Ha ha. Black American men are the bottom of my list. Ha ha ha?? . . . As a black mother of sons, . . . I care if a network decides that for laughs and giggles, it's funny that young black men are at the bottom . . . The stereotypes aren't funny or helpful. Why is it always fair game on us? (Will, 2019)

There is also the charge of racism. Many see the show as racist, and it perpetuates White supremacist content in the representation of African Americans. There are comments that draw on 19th-century racist minstrel shows where White people performed in blackface, suggesting that the White creators use Black immigrants to project racist views of Black Americans. A comment on Twitter states, "it's just another example of White supremacy and their proxies trying to distort and discredit #ADOS" (Mdv, 2019). Another reads, "This show allows operatives of White supremacy to spew anti Foundational American Descendant of Slavery rhetoric. This show is the new Blackface" (#VGQ, 2019). Dosia (2019) states, it is a "platform for another wave of immigrants fanning the flames of racism and bigotry towards Black Americans / ADOS."

Since the show is considered disrespectful and racist to African Americans, it is not surprising that a theme of protest is quite vivid in the social media responses. Nearly all the protest calls are from the Twitter comments, with hashtags such as #cancelbobheartsabishola, #cancelabishola, and #BoycottBobHeartsAbishola. The protest calls are strong and direct and are indicative of strong reactions from many African Americans who considered the early episodes to be disrespectful to African Americans.

Nigerian Caricature

The ambivalence of representation is also noted in some ways that Nigerians are represented. Although the show may have been successful in providing visibility to Nigerian immigrants in the American cultural imaginings through the media, the attempt to highlight aspects of the Nigerian ways of life in a comedic genre occasionally slips into a farce that caricaturizes this community. Examples of this can be seen in the scripting of family involvement in a woman's romantic and marital interest, ineptitude to grasp basic sarcasm, and hyperbolic representation of Nigerian immigrants as hardworking and highly focused on child's educational success. There is also the exaggerated performance of the stereotype of a domineering and aggressive Nigerian womanhood, which invariably disempowers Nigerian masculinity, as in the example of Abishola's aunt and her husband. This representation slips into a theme of tradition versus modernity, not only the exaggerated involvement in a child's romantic interest but also the image of a Nigerian man stuck in traditional patriarchy. Although traditional patriarchal tendencies may exist among Nigerian men, presenting this in a form of cartoonish cultural emasculation reduces the comedic ambience to a farcical caricature. In a scene in episode 4, a Nigerian male pharmacist is introduced to Abishola as a possible husband by their families. He then promises that if a relationship ensues, he would allow Abishola to keep her job as a nurse because he is "modern."

This caricature contracts with the interracial trope employed in the plot of a successful White American male, who retains his power and confidence in his pursuance of his interest in Abishola. A comment on Twitter encapsulates this observation well; "The 'first' Nigerian-American show is about a White man falling in love with a Nigerian? Why not a Nigerian husband, wife and kids? Why make fun of Nigerian men?" (ADOS.la, 2019). There are also comments that critique interracial relationship themes in the American media, as typified in this sitcom, usually of a White male and a Black female and not vice versa.

There is also an ambivalence with the positionality of Gina Yashere, the British-Nigerian immigrant cocreator of the show. Although she has creative agency and voice in contributing to a storyline that enhances a positive representation of Nigerian immigrants, arguably, her ability to copresent a

balanced Nigerian representation in a comedy genre may equally be questioned. Irrespective of her Nigerian parentage, she is British and has plied the negative stereotype of Nigeria as a violent place in her stand-up comedic shows. She has told of her visit to Nigeria and of being scared of the place and the people. She decided to "stay in the hotel with the White people" (Yashere, 2014, 2:14). This ambivalence comes from the hybridity of her postcolonial immigrant identity of being Nigerian, British, and living in the United States, which creates what Achebe (1995) calls "crossroads of cultures" that manifests in attraction and repulsion to different cultures that shape the identity of a postcolonial subject.

Conclusion

BHA (Lorre et al., 2019–2023) provides a critical moment in the African immigrant representation on U.S. television. It is a story about a Nigerian immigrant, featuring Nigerian immigrant actors in the cast, cowritten and coproduced by an immigrant of Nigerian descent. This presents a remarkable platform for this immigrant population group to assert their voices and agencies in creating stories about themselves, and confront their symbolic annihilation and negative representations. The performance of culture as seen in *BHA* meets yearnings of these African postcolonial immigrants, who found themselves in Western spaces disconnected from authentic everyday cultural experiences in the home country.

The legacy of colonial separateness of Africans and African Americans, the colonialist discourses, and media stereotypical narratives about Africans and African Americans have led to postcolonial sociocultural friction in the Black community in the United States. If the early episodes of the show attempt to address the stereotypes, judging by the many responses to the show, the attempt couched in comedic ambience of an American sitcom has brought this friction to the fore and may have inadvertently exacerbated the separateness and cultural friction. Many viewers protested the disrespectful representation of African Americans in certain scenes of the sitcom. American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS), an emerging social movement advocating for the interests of descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States, called for the boycott and the cancellation of the sitcom (Harrison, 2019).

The ambivalence of media representation, I argue here, is predicated on the postcolonial ambivalence that describes the ambiguous relationship between African immigrants and African Americans. This is seen in occasional attraction and repulsion often observed in the assumptions of African immigrants' sense of superiority and looking down on African Americans. It is seen in African Americans' occasional yearning for African roots but also plying colonial and media stereotypical narratives about Africans and Africa. It also relates to the contentions about social and cultural visibility of Africans in cultural spaces that should represent Africa American presence (Massey et al., 2007; Nsangou & Dundes, 2018; Pierre, 2004).

This study shows a subversion of symbolic annihiliation can be attempted through a group's visibility, agency, and recognition. In the context of limited and negative representation of Africans on U.S. media, the cultural visibility of Nigerian immigrants on a prime time U.S. televison show was important. Equally important was the creative agency of these postcolonial Nigerian immigrants with their hybrid identities as key characters, cowriter, and coproducer of the show. This visibility leads to cultural recognition of Nigerians and Africans in the American popular culture, a recognition that is essential for immigrant incoproration in a country (Bloemraad et al. 2015).

Finally, *BHA* (Lorre et al., 2019–2023) has contributed to cultural visibility of Africans, specifically Nigerian immigrants in U.S. entertainment media narrative. For African Americans, a minority group that has suffered various forms of oppression and inequities, the jokes in some scenes in the introductory episodes are in bad taste. Confronting the stereotypes in the sociocultural frictions in the Black community makes for good cultural stories in the media, but to avoid an ambivalence of media representation, such stories should be crafted with sensitivity, irrespective of the artistic genre or format. Sophisticated artistry is necessary in others telling stories about a group and not the group telling its own stories. For *BHA*, some scenes hurt rather than heal; the producers should be cognizant of the ambivalence of media representation in future episodes.

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