

## Research Article

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# “Beef Jerky in a Ball Gown”: The Camp Excesses of Titus Andromedon in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*

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**Abstract:** In this essay, we look at Titus Andromedon from the Netflix-sitcom *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2014-) as a singular phenomenon in contemporary TV: a black queen whose use of camp distances him from stereotypes, but connects him with audiences. Titus thus not only adds to a more diverse representation of black experience on TV but also interrogates prevailing TV tropes. Titus thus presents a crucial (and critical) addition to the contemporary TV landscape, to which several TV critics in leading media outlets have recently attested a turning point in the representation—both in quantity and quality—of black characters on big and small screens. Titus breaks with historical traditions of African American representation in the sitcom, both in so-called “black sitcoms” with a majority of African American characters and in white sitcoms which have featured people of color as sidekicks. In addition, Titus picks up on gay sidekicks and their relation to female lead characters, whose dynamics are interrogated through Titus’s growing agency as a character in his own right. Titus expands on these novelties in meaningful ways, as he wholeheartedly embraces his queer identity and furthermore offers a running commentary on other characters’ “white nonsense,” thereby clearly refusing the assimilationist tendencies typical for much of “Post-Cosby”-sitcom black representation. This article therefore claims that Titus’ character relies on camp in his balancing act between comic relief, affective centering, and critical distance, and illustrates this by analyzing the specific techniques of Titus’ critical engagement with stereotypical representation of gay and black TV characters.

**Keywords:** *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, camp, sitcom, queer, black, representation

## Black Representation in Contemporary TV

In this essay, we look at Titus Andromedon from the Netflix-sitcom *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2014-) as a singular phenomenon in contemporary TV: a black queen whose use of camp distances him from stereotypes, but connects him with audiences, whereby he not only adds to a more diverse representation of black experience on TV but also interrogates prevailing TV tropes. Titus thus presents a crucial (and critical) addition to the contemporary TV landscape, to which several TV critics in leading media outlets have recently attested a turning point in the representation—both in quantity and quality—of black characters on big and small screens. Jenée Osterheldt as a case in point titles her article “TV Finally Gets It: Blacks Are More Than Sidekicks, Comic Relief and Bullies,” which asserts a more nuanced depiction of black characters beyond traditional stereotypes and their limitations. Similarly, *The Atlantic*’s “Claiming the Future of Black TV” considers the progress made since the last renaissance of black representation in the 1990s (Bastién), when *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–1992) “systematically spawned a number of network

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Black sitcoms [... which] served as a catalyst for the cross-over appeal of Black programming” (Coleman, McIlwain, and Matthews 280) and television therefore saw “the diversification and mainstreaming of many Black sitcoms” (Nelson 85). This rise in representation, however, was relatively short-lived as most series did not live up to the commercial expectations raised by *The Cosby Show*’s enormous success. Most series, like the trend’s originator, *The Cosby Show*, were furthermore plagued by their assimilationist tendencies (see Nelson 85; Coleman, McIlwain, and Matthews 280–81). Similarly, even the recent rise in diverse ensemble casts often fails to question “white heroism and centrism,” as non-white characters lack the emotional depth and narrative weight of their white counterparts (Beltran). And despite “all the considerable strides forward” since the 1990s, the recent increase in representation of black characters on network TV as well as in streaming services continues to neglect the geographic, economic, and sexual diversity of the U.S. American black experience (Bastién). For Bastién, one of the main reasons for the still limited scope of black representation is recent TV’s obsession with auteurs (like *Mad Men*’s Matthew Weiner or *The Sopranos*’ David Chase), who are usually white men telling the stories of other white men. Among the notable exceptions to the homogeneous list are Shonda Rhimes and—especially relevant to discussions about TV comedy—Tina Fey, who created the setting for what we argue is a noteworthy expansion of the scope of contemporary black representation: Titus Andromedon and his camp performances.

Fey has established herself as a central figure of contemporary comedy, which is itself a genre often excluded from discourses of quality and auteur, through her critical success *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-2013). Like other quality TV shows, *30 Rock* was less marked by its commercial success than the prestige it brought its network.<sup>1</sup> Her latest show, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, created and produced by Fey together with Robert Carlock, profited from its predecessor’s popularity among critics. Netflix bought two full seasons and a third season premiered in May 2017, after NBC had failed to find a suitable programming niche for a show that was not only what Emily Nussbaum in her *New Yorker* review called “a peculiar, propulsive mashup of tabloid obsessions,” but also effectively “a sitcom about a rape survivor.”

*Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* follows the story of an “Indiana mole woman” who has escaped from a doomsday cultist’s underground bunker after 15 years of isolation and physical and sexual abuse, and now tries to start a new life in the anonymous, urban jungle of New York City. Kimmy (Ellie Kemper) is joined in the first episodes by a number of sidekicks, including trophy wife Jacqueline Voorhees (Jane Krakowski), eccentric landlady Lillian Kaushtupper (Carol Kane), and her new roommate Titus Andromedon (Titus Burgess), a black, gay wannabe-Broadway-star and puppet-furniture-aficionado. Titus’ character, written specifically for Titus Burgess, who had worked with Fey before on *30 Rock* as gay hairdresser D’Fwan in the show-within-the-show *Queen of Jordan*, is not only an almost singular phenomenon in contemporary TV for being a black gay character portrayed by a black gay actor.<sup>2</sup> Titus furthermore expands the straight, upwardly mobile, coastal city cliché of black representation bemoaned by Bastién: He is an often unemployed, unapologetic queen with Southern roots who might live within the city limits of New York, but whose experience of what is called *East Dogmouth* in the series<sup>3</sup> clashes with the image of liberal, coastal towns in which contemporary black experience is usually represented, such as in *Black-ish* (ABC 2014-) or *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014-). Not only does the character of Titus fulfill calls for more diverse representations of blackness by being not straight, not rich, not quite urban, and not quite masculine. He also breaks with historical traditions of African American representation in the sitcom, both in so-called “black sitcoms” with a majority of African American characters and in white sitcoms which have featured people of color as sidekicks. In addition, Titus picks up on gay sidekicks and their relation to female lead characters, whose dynamics are interrogated through Titus’s growing agency as a character in his own right. Titus expands on these novelties in meaningful ways, as he wholeheartedly embraces his queer identity and furthermore offers a running commentary on other characters’ “white nonsense,” thereby clearly refusing the assimilationist tendencies typical for much of “Post-Cosby”-sitcom black representation. This article

1 For a discussion of the series’ relation to discourses of quality TV, see Horn.

2 We thank our anonymous reviewer for reminding us of the cast of *Noah’s Arc* (Logo, 2005-2006) and Luther (Ray Ford) on *Don’t Trust the B--- in Apartment 23* (ABC, 2012-2013).

3 *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* is mostly shot on location in the Bronx. The show’s numerous references to events and landmarks, however, make it possible to read the neighbourhood as either the Bronx or Harlem.

therefore claims that Titus' character relies on camp in his balancing act between comic relief, affective centering, and critical distance, and illustrates this by analyzing the specific techniques of Titus' critical engagement with stereotypical representation of gay and black TV characters.

## Whose Camp Is It Anyway?

Most literature on camp treats it as the kind of “white nonsense,” Titus regularly bemoans. If people of color are mentioned, it is usually as inspirations for white performers (see Smith on Dusty Springfield) or to spice up lists of camp practitioners without, however, giving them individual attention concerning their specific techniques or input (see Dyer on Little Richard). Singer Grace Jones, for example, is regularly mentioned (e.g. Hawkins 50), yet seldom examined in the same depth as her contemporaries Madonna or Annie Lennox (see Rodger; Hawkins). Steven Cohan has dedicated an insightful article to the postfeminist camp politics of the overwhelmingly white reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo, 2003-2007), whereas the use of camp in the much more diverse show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Logo, 2009-) has yet to receive similar scholarly attention. If the camp uses by people of color are examined, it is usually on the margins of mainstream culture, such as theatrical productions (see Muñoz, 119-141, on Carmelita Tropicana; Lee on Margaret Cho) or subcultural performances such as voguing (see Chatzipapathodoridis).

This discrepancy, we argue, results both from theoretical and representational limitations, as mainstream culture is still dominated by white images, and white performers are thus given the most leeway to step out of conventional norms of representation. Academia has historically shown a similar bias, even within the context of queer studies. Consequently, most studies view camp as comparable to, yet different from strategies employed by ethnic minorities. Dennis Altman, for example, correlates camp and soul in their respective importance for queer and black audiences, but at the same time denies any overlap between the two strategies (149; see also Newton 102). Richard Dyer's seminal essay “It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going” critically reflects on Altman's quote “Camp is to gay what soul is to black” to stress the ‘dangers’ of both camp and soul as limiting political advancement, but not to question the assumed distinction between the two strategies and their practitioners. In her analysis of Mae West's employment of black images and supporting characters to authenticate her camp performance, Pamela Robertson accordingly notes the “consistency of the category ‘black’ as the counterpart of camp (as opposed to other racial or ethnic categories)” (“Mae West” 394) and a repeated usage of blackness for camp that “relies on th[e] double move of othering and identification to position a porous and mobile queer identity” (398). Conversely, however, such processes of appropriation of queer politics by black performers—or what is perceived as such by critics who assume a white gay male as the default connoisseur of camp—are rarely noted in terms of camp because “such performances are generally described in relation to practices of ‘signifying’” (406). McMillan echoed Robertson's assessment in his 2011-talk on Nicky Minaj's eccentricity, when he (reluctantly) stated that “when blacks do camp, we call it signifying.” There is, however, good reason to not conflate camp and signifying simply because the racial identity of performer or audience might imply one or the other. We see these two minority strategies or “two modes of masquerade” (Robertson 407)—similar in their intent to alleviate the burden of a discriminatory environment—as nonetheless employing distinct tactics and aesthetics. Hence, “when blacks do camp,” as we suggest Titus does, it should not go by any other name.<sup>4</sup>

One of the possible effects of signifying—similar to camp practices—is community-building. It is a practice that can, as Jason Esters observes, “affirm, critique, or build community through the involvement of its participants” (842). Typical African American strategies of signifying include “marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens, and so on” (52), strategies that were often seen as typical elements of a ritualistic practice by black men. For Henry L. Gates, Jr., one of the most important scholars on signifying, it is a literary strategy that makes use of other rhetorical tropes and strategies like indirection, irony, parody, metaphor, or metonymy (52) in order to repeat and revise both black and white pretexts with “a signal difference” (xxiv) and thus add a humorous and critical edge

<sup>4</sup> See Mayo (especially 246–248) for a suggestion of how to think signifying and camping together in terms of a pedagogy of humour.

to it. He quotes Kimberly W. Benston’s pun: “When one Signifies, . . . one ‘tropes-a-dope’” (52). For Gates, signifying is primarily an act of “repetition and revision” (xxiv).

Camp, on the other hand, is marked additionally by an affective excess that extends from performer to audience, as to “be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits” (Booth 69). This excessive commitment towards the camp object (which Horn has defined in depth as *detached attachment* in *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture*) is as crucial to camp’s effects as the aesthetic excess that is usually considered camp’s prime marker. Exaggerated affect differentiates camp from political as much as non-political phenomena with similar aesthetics (for example, signifying and kitsch, respectively).<sup>5</sup> Enthusiasm for the marginal marks Titus as a camp figure who is characteristically attached to all things outmoded and marginal, from cassettes to the “Helen Keller-inspired—but unauthorized—musical *Feels Like Love*” (2x05). The same enthusiasm importantly characterizes audiences’ reactions to him, as he starts out as a marginal character (insofar as he is part of the supporting cast in a show revolving around a white, straight central character) to which the audience is invited to become gradually more attached beyond the scope usually reserved for the tropes of gay best friend or black best friend.

Such comparisons to prior or normative media representations are essential to analyzing camp effects due to the strategy’s relational character. Camp is “parasitic” on mainstream discourses, as Robertson puts it (*Guilty Pleasures* 122), and functions via “an active refashioning of mass culture” (Taylor 51). Such “refashioning” is achieved through a combination of irony, exaggeration, theatricality, incongruity, and humor. The result is a parody characterized by critical distance not only from the specific intertext camp draws on, but more broadly from the (heteronormative, racist) value system that defined the original reference. Camp is queer not simply by way of its connection to gender ambiguity and non-normative sexuality, but because of its impulse to dethrone “the normal.” It is, as Muñoz in one of the most exhaustive studies on non-white users of camp claims, “a strategic response to the breakdown of representation that occurs when a queer, ethnically marked, or other subject encounters his or her inability to fit within the majoritarian representational regime” (128). Importantly (and in contrast to signifying), camp performances intervene into the exclusionary discourses of contemporary media landscapes by encouraging audiences to keep (or establish) their critical distance from normative narratives and images, while simultaneously creating objects for pleasurable attachment—thereby offering, to pick up on Sedgwick’s intervention into norms of queer studies and traditions of camp scholarship (*Touching* 149-50), the joy of reparative effects.

## Comic Contexts: *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and Traditions of Gay and Black Representation in the U.S. American Sitcom

Of crucial importance for Titus’s camp ability to refer to and break with traditions of representation concerning both gay and black characters is *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*’s overall carnivalesque and highly intertextual environment described in reviews as “a live-action animated farce populated with outlandish characters interacting with a slapstick-happy world” (McFarland) and marked by “rapid-fire, hyper-self-aware jokes” (O’Keeffe). As in *30 Rock*, many of the series’ story lines, including its main theme of Kimmy’s abduction and imprisonment, are taken more or less directly from US American current affairs to offer a scathing critique of contemporary culture. Such references are included through dialogue (as when Titus in 1x11 searches online for the live stream of the trial against Kimmy’s kidnapper with the words “Women, kidnapped, bunker, trial” and scrolls through the result as he comments: “Nope. Not the one in the abandoned Bennigan’s. Not that one or that one. Come on, Florida. Scrolling, scrolling Indiana. Finally.

<sup>5</sup> As Sedgwick notes, “Unlike kitsch-attribution . . . camp-recognition doesn’t ask, ‘What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?’ Instead, it says *what if*: What if the right audience for this were exactly me? . . . And what if, furthermore, others whom I don’t know or recognize can see it from the same ‘perverse’ angle?” (*Epistemology* 156, emphasis in the original).

What is up, society?"); musical cues (such as the autotuned theme song), as much as visual gags (one of the latest examples being a poster shown in 3x13 with president Trump in a NYC police station in the style of "Uncle Sam" which states "You're a loser"). In this excessively stylized and excessively intertextual context, Titus "drama queen"-persona fits right in with other stylized characters rather than setting him apart from a supposed normativity of central characters, even as his colorfully cynical character remains expressively distanced from his television predecessors of BBFs (black best friends) and gay sidekicks. The series' structure furthermore allows Titus, who represents an amalgam of traits of different supporting characters, to gradually take on a more central role, which strengthens his critical position and his ability to establish himself as a major character in opposition to the mostly functional or decorative uses of LGBT characters and people of color in other overwhelmingly straight, white stories. Importantly for this development, season two introduces Titus's own romantic subplot, in which white women take over the role of his sidekick rather than the other way around.<sup>6</sup> In "Kimmy Goes Roller Skating!" (2x01), the roles (and tropes) are inverted as Kimmy sits down with Titus's ex-wife to explain his actions and smooth things over. In reversed accordance with the "incidental queer" used in the "service of heterosexual reunion" (Walters 155), Kimmy in the end serves as the conduit for Titus and his ex-wife's reunion dance at a rail platform and subsequent goodbye on good terms, whereas Titus refuses to intervene in her love triangle. Three episodes later, the stakes are raised to two white women who work tirelessly to help Titus—not get a boyfriend (he is quite capable of that)—but commit to him. The story line, revolving around the relationship between Titus and construction worker Mikey (himself a left-over former cat caller from *30 Rock*), becomes one of the main story arcs through which Titus can establish himself as a character independent from his role in Kimmy's life and one worth emotional investment by the audience. Through camp, Titus adds to the "heart" of the series, which several critics have noted as one of its key strengths (e.g. Upadhyaya), a function which intensifies as Titus "takes center stage" in the third season (Davies) and thus further strengthens his reparative prospects. Titus thereby rejects the representational confines that have defined minority characters and instead allows the audience to engage with and relate to the cultural differences he embodies.

The representation of 'black difference' has a longer tradition in comedy than in any other genre, going back as far as *Andy n Amos* (CBS, 1951-1953) and thriving in the 1980s with *The Cosby Show* and its successors. Similarly, gay characters also caught their first break on national television in sitcoms, such as *Soap* (ABC, 1977-1981), *Ellen* (ABC, 1994-1998) and *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006),<sup>7</sup> before drama series dared putting them front and center. The presence of minority characters in comedic formats is often a result of comedy's usage to make cultural difference more easily digestible for mainstream audiences. In such cases, the genre diffuses what has been construed as the specter of Otherness and threat of difference in a white, heteronormative American cultural imaginary. Comedy, however, also has the potential to critically intervene into representational regimes, to parody traditions, and to dismantle stereotypes.

Among these stereotypes, as indicated before, are the black best friend and the gay best friend to white, straight characters in shows dominated by other white straight characters. The black best friend, BBF, is a highly popular trope in contemporary TV. Eric Deggans counts at least 13 TV shows, including CBS's *2 Broke Girls* (2011-2017) or Fox's *New Girl* (2011- ), featuring BBFs.<sup>8</sup> The popularity of BBFs hinges on their relation to white characters. In his article on "The Latest TV trend," Deggans notes that "they're the folks who offer emotional support, wise, world-weary counsel and a kick in the pants when needed—often administered with a dash of sass and the occasional finger snap," making sure that in the end it is always the lead character who shines. BBFs, as Deggans explains, are "eternally useful to the lead character" because they

<sup>6</sup> This development has the additional trope-breaking effect that Titus remains not, as is usual for the gay sidekick, the only gay character within the show, as Mikey and their relationship receives ample screen time. Additionally, season one had introduced the recurring character of a fellow "mole woman's" trophy husband, a gay man she had a crush on in high school, while season three features several episodes with Titus' new love interest, a black pastor.

<sup>7</sup> A reboot is scheduled to air on NBC in 2017, which has raised questions among numerous news outlets in how far the show's humour (and its gay male characters) does hold up against a completely new context of queer representation, such as *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-) or *Looking* (HBO, 2014-2016).

<sup>8</sup> A different form of BBF has been prominent in Hollywood cinema in the context of buddy movies, where the interracial friendship is reserved for two male characters, cf. Artz.

“never really steal the spotlight for long.”<sup>9</sup> Titus fulfills main criteria of the BBF characteristically being “[l]oyal. Cool. Exotic.” What distinguishes his character from the conventional usage of the trope, however, is that it is (more often than not) him who shines. Thus, while being a black best friend, Titus defies being reduced to the role of the sidekick. He rather constitutes a central character in his own right who has his own independent subplots focused on his relationships with others.

Black sitcoms, in contrast, center on the interaction between black characters who also play each other off through jokes, gags, and insults—usually in a home or workplace setting (see Nelson). Strikingly, however, representations of race are not necessarily more nuanced and diverse. As Angela M. S. Nelson has shown, black characters are depicted as stereotypes in predominantly two ways: in line with the minstrel tradition, shows from the 1950s and 1960s like *The Beulah Show* (ABC, 1950-1953) or *Amos ‘n’ Andy* presented Blacks as “domineering mummies, Uncle Toms, lazy coons” (81), which was taken up in the 1970s that saw a “revival of coon characters” (85) in shows like *The Jeffersons* (NBC, 1975-1985). The other main trend was set in the late 1960s with *Julia* (NBC, 1968-1971) and its portrayal of upper-middle-class assimilated and fully integrated African Americans. These assimilationist tendencies, as we have noted in the introduction to this article, can also be attested to the 1980s and 1990s that witnessed a flowering of black representation through the success of *The Cosby Show* (see Adamo 3-6; Nelson 84-85).<sup>10</sup> That is, in the genre of the sitcom, Blacks have been limited to stereotypical roles, namely to a set of stock characters in the black tradition of the genre and to the trope of the BBF in the white sitcom.

Suzanna Danuta Walters characterizes the gay version of this trope as one variety of the “incidental queer” favored by the 1990s media (one of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*’s primary points of reference due to Kimmy’s abduction and Titus’s refusal to adept to progress) and thriving since then. These characters’ main purpose, Walters observes, is “to unite heterosexual couples, or to provide solace to heterosexuals sufferings from the slings and arrows of wayward affections” (155). While present particularly in romantic comedies, the gay best friend has developed a clear presence in TV as well, among others in such iconic shows as *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) and *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006-2010). Here, the characters serve as “perfect partners for gossip and shopping,” while they remain “blithely unencumbered by political concerns” (Khamis / Lambert 113). Make-over shows (primarily, though not exclusively, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*) have given additional spotlight to this type of fashion-conscious, consumer oriented depiction of gay men in the service of heteronormative success. The functions of minority figures as orbiting around lead characters, who provide the narrative and affective center of a show, are repeatedly subverted in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. Titus himself moves to the center, comments on the tropes (and thereby unmasks their repetitiveness and offensiveness), and establishes himself through camp as the individualized break with, rather than continuation of, clichés of black and queer TV representation. Additionally, his character contrasts with the normalizing impulses of minority depictions.

<sup>9</sup> This definition is taken from Deggans’s 2011 article for *The Washington Post*. For a more in-depth take on the phenomenon including a definition of different sub-categories, see the chapter “From Supernegroes to BBFs: Why Network TV Still Often Stars White America” in his book *Race-Baiter: How the Media Wields Dangerous Words to Divide a Nation*. For an explanation of the relation between TV’s “postracial moment” and the rise in female BBFs in particular, see Sarah Turner (251).

<sup>10</sup> Nelson explains that the minstrel-tradition of black representation in the sitcom connects to the fact that producers sought to depict Blacks in familiar roles and occupational positions, e.g. as domestics, to underscore the status symbol of the white middle-class family who employed them (81). The fact that most TV networks are owned by white male executives who control black images explains why representations of race have not been more complex and diverse (86). Similarly, in her reading of *Bamboozled*, Susan Gubar has argued that Spike Lee’s 2001 film takes issue with racial stereotypes populating the entertainment sector, since “[n]o matter how Lee’s characters repudiate, advocate, or recycle racial affiliations, they prove the fatality of a blackness still defined as base embodiment” (31). To Gubar, *Bamboozled* constitutes one of the most prominent camp revisions of the minstrel tradition and related critique of the American culture industry (36).

## Lemonading Beef Jerky: Titus Andromedon's Camp Performances of Black Gay Masculinity

In *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt's* pilot episode, Titus describes himself as “I’m pretty, but tough like a diamond or beef jerky in a ball gown.” The discrepancy between the cheap, low-cultural, masculine-connotated dried meat and expensive, feminine designer fashion is typical for camp’s love of incongruity to “redefine the seemingly stable relations of form to content, surface to depth” (Cohan, *Incongruity* 18). The additional contrast with “diamond” not only adds another layer to the incongruous self-description, but also evokes Fabio Cleto’s uses of diamonds as symbols for camp. Neither, Cleto argues, “can be detached from the social contract that values it”; both rely on a very specific cultural capital to be recognized (1-2) and “[t]he beams of light are produced in a diamond”—like the critical reflections produced by the camp figure—“by the refraction of an outer source on and through its multifaceted surface” (6).

Titus’s performance “refracts” popular culture’s representation of race by providing critical commentary, which has been bemoaned as a dimension lacking in the sitcom, as well as by articulating his lacking identification with and critical position towards what is construed as typically white behavior and cultural values through the use of the catchphrase “white nonsense.” While *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* has been severely criticized for its lackluster treatment of race, for example, for the portrayal of Jacqueline Voorhees’s Native American ancestry (1x03), which led *Buzzfeed* writer Anne Helen Peterson to state that the show has a “major race problem,” Titus has in the same breath been identified as a “nuanced” exception to this rule. His jokes, we argue, significantly contain commentary on race and thus add a political dimension not only to the show but also the genre of the sitcom as such.

A striking example for the show’s critique of racism is offered in “Kimmy Goes to the Doctor” (1x04) when Titus tells Lillian of how “walking around New York dressed as a werewolf just got . . . weird.” Titus, depicting Frankenstein’s creation as part of his work for a theme restaurant, was walking the streets of the city wearing a werewolf mask. A flashback reveals his astonishment—and makes the viewer chuckle in disbelief—at people’s reactions. First, a cab stopped and offered to transport him even though he had not hailed one. Then a white police officer looks at him with a serious expression which prompts Titus to go into self-defense taking up his hands and claiming: “I didn’t do anything.” The police officer does not even seem to hear him as he smiles mildly, saying “Nice day, huh, sir?” Eventually, the events climax in a white woman asking Titus-turned-werewolf to hold her baby. The scene is not only hilarious considering the incongruity of people’s overtly friendly reactions to Titus’s embodiment of a werewolf considering that a werewolf is a mythological figure popularly employed in fantasy and horror fiction in which a man with supernatural powers has the ability to shapeshift into a wild wolf and sets out into the world driven by an instinct to kill. The scene gains its additional critical impetus from the fact that Titus is a black man wearing the mask and where Titus reacts according to dominant racial scripts and expects people in his surroundings to do the same, they—surprisingly to him—do not. Viewers realize the tragic irony of the scene, noticing from Titus’s reactions that he—being obviously usually faced with racism and perceived as a racial stereotype (which ironically clashes with his character)—is not used to being treated that well. When Titus explicates what the viewer has already realized and responds to Kimmy who is surprised to find him walking the city rather than at work “I’ve decided to live as a werewolf. It’s so much easier than being an African American man,” the audience’s laughter is ensured. That Titus feels he is being treated better as a werewolf than as a black man is ironic. The scene mocks and criticizes conventional white responses to black men who are stereotypically figured as “wild animals” and construed as a potential social danger. Simultaneously, it exposes the social constructedness of what is perceived as a danger or not—and (at least in) the world of the show, a werewolf obviously falls into the latter category.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> That Titus as part of his response to Kimmy conclusively imagines himself as an actor in a melodrama in which he turns from a werewolf into Samuel L. Jackson, whereupon what was earlier construed as an empathetic white couple flees in shock, contributes to the hilarity of the scene.

Another recurring device that reflects the show’s concern with race is Titus’s (re-)use of the catchphrase “white nonsense.”<sup>12</sup> The expression was introduced by Angie Jordan on *30 Rock* who mocked Liz Lemon when she tried to bond with her by offering herself as a “sassy black friend.” Ironically, Titus regularly shows his lacking understanding of white people’s behavior and cultural values by calling out the question “what white nonsense is that?” In “Kimmy Rides a Bike” (1x11), the catchphrase is particularly efficiently employed. In the episode, Titus watches the trial of the preacher who had abducted Kimmy and the other ‘mole women’ online. Bolting through the streets of the city, he finds himself imaginatively being haunted by the preacher whose theatricality had earlier impressed him. Just as the preacher’s voice in Titus’s mind (which is depicted via a bubble filled with the preacher’s head next to Titus’s) raises and warns him that “Evil will rise from the depths of the earth!” Titus’s horrid fantasies are interrupted by three bankers. They emerge from a subway station—and thus symbolically “from the depths of the earth”—and one of them shouts “Bottles and models, bitches! Woo-hoo!” whereupon they give each other high fives. Unable to relate to the capitalist values embodied and endorsed by the three white bankers as well as buddy-like macho behavior, Titus calls out: “What white nonsense was that?” In the same episode, he asks Kimmy the same question when she, referring to her esoteric spinning class called “spirit cycle,” informs him that she will not attend the trial but “follow my bliss and Indiana is nowhere near my mind beach.” Titus who cannot be able to understand Kimmy for the simple reason that she has not told him of her fitness class yet expresses his lacking understanding of her decision, which to him is but another example of white people’s weird behavior, by asking: “What white nonsense is this?” Later in the episode, he challenges Kimmy, who has bought into the esoteric ideas of her spinning class teacher and begun to lock herself up in order to keep on spinning, to split with the teacher because “that monster told you how to dress, how to wear your hair, what to think.” The statement underscores his critical distance from white capitalist values which had been conveyed by the earlier scenes and to which he as a gay sidekick would usually be bound. Titus’s repeated outcry at “white nonsense” clearly reflects his anti-assimilationist position, which distinguishes his character from fully integrated black characters like Julia Baker in *Julia* or assimilated (upper-)middle-class black characters in the genre who have, like Kimmy, been absorbed by “the monster” of white capitalism. In addition, engaging and revising the trope of the BBF, the episode just cited illustrates Titus’s significance as a true friend of Kimmy’s *and* as a central character of the show.

Other “refractions of contemporary culture,” Titus produces on the level of gender. At least three episodes explicitly address performances of black masculinity by featuring story lines which make it necessary for Titus to ‘act straight.’ In “Kimmy’s in a Love Triangle!” (1x10), Titus enlists a “straight coach” to become sufficiently butch and thus to better his chances to get hired as an actor—a scenario which gives the series room to spoof the supposedly effortless performance of straight masculinity. In “Kimmy Goes to School” (1x06), Titus’s mere presence (in a handyman’s outfit) as a black man causes panic among the white hipster youth hanging out in Central Park who—icing on the irony cake—smoke an antique pipe of a former slave owner. Finally, in “Kimmy is a Feminist” (3x06), Titus is tasked with performing the role of gay best friend to Jacqueline, before the situation calls for him to instead play the role of a straight dude pretending to be a gay guy to get the girl (“a classic move,” as his competitor for Jacqueline’s affection calls it). In all of these scenes, Titus’s extreme theatricality serves to underline the equal theatricality of the (straight, white) people surrounding him as well as the narrowness of scripts of gender and race in which everyday interactions are bound. The latter scene additionally crystallizes the offensiveness of the gay best friend trope, which Titus repeatedly rejects with Kimmy, where he would have to ‘play it straight,’ as she—as opposed to Jacqueline—is not aware of its conventionality.

Gender play and role-playing, as several scholars have insisted (see Robertson, *Guilty* on the former; Babuscio, 24ff, on the latter), are central to camp. The list of camp icons is, however, led by those who celebrate androgyny (i.e. Annie Lennox) or extreme performances of femininity (i.e. drag queens, Cher)

<sup>12</sup> *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* acknowledges the racial discrepancy in media references in “Kimmy Gives Up” (2x05) through a dialogue between Kimmy and her school’s black secretary, when Kimmy fails to get which TV characters Deborah is alluding to after she had referred to herself and Dong as “basically the Roz and Frasier of our class.” Deborah’s reaction: “I get it. I kind of have a Kyle and Maxine thing with my boss. [pause] Oh, you don’t know *Living Single*, but I’m supposed to know everything about *Frasier*?”

rather than performances akin to Titus's send-up of masculinity. Diva references are therefore another stable feature of Titus's characterization. Importantly, however, and in line with Titus' unusual (at least for the sitcom) treatment of race, he rejects "camp's troubling mania over white glamorous femininities" (Chatzipapatheodoridis 12) in favor of repeated evocations of Whitney Houston and a prolonged storyline featuring his potential cannibalism-on-sea of Dionne Warwick in season three.

Yet the ultimate diva-admiration and camp-appreciation moment is reserved for Beyoncé, when Titus works through the different stages of his breakup with construction worker Mikey by channeling the singer's 2016 visual album *Lemonade* (3x02). In an episode structured by original songs inspired by "Hold Up," "Sorry," and "All Night," *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* recreates *Lemonade*'s visuals in trash-aesthetics with partially nonsensical lyrics ("Sometimes pop songs don't really rhyme / this will sound fine to your mind") or poignantly absurd ones: Beyoncé's spoken word introduction to "Sorry" states: "Here lies the body of the love of my life / whose heart I broke without a gun to my head? / Here lies the mother of my children, both living and dead? / . . . Her heaven will be a love without betrayal." For "Whatever's" Titus instead muses: "What will you say at my funeral now that you've killed me? / Here lies Titus, stepmother to my lizards, both living and dead? / His heaven will be a grand piano full of baked potatoes." At the same time, however, the song's emotional impact is kept intact, if not intensified through Titus's Burgesses performance which treats the re-write not as a parody, but elevates what his character calls "lemonading" to a sincere and intense response to his heartbreak and finally also sign of his personal growth. Like the original songs, which are introduced in the videos with the keywords "Denial," "Apathy," and "Redemption" respectively, Titus's song selection, too, follows an emotional trajectory from "Furiosity" and "Apathy" to a final untitled song (a take on "All Night"). Here, Titus wanders through a roof garden in a dress similar to Beyoncé's, while contemplating "true love." Its lyrics include japs against his former boyfriend (a parallel which made him set free Mikey in the first place), as when he sings, "Then run from the dentist cause hell no you're not eating zoodles."

Overall, however, the focus is only on Titus and his new-found insight into what "true love" really means and his growing awareness of his own selfishness. This song lacks an introductory keyword as title which would stress its position outside the narrative<sup>13</sup> and strengthen its status as a reference, and it is the only one not to feature Lillian as his sidekick (in "Whatever's," she is the Serena Williams to his Beyoncé, in "Furiosity" she joins the rest of their neighborhood in recreating iconic scenes from "Hold Up"). At the end of the song, Titus is in tears and the audience is invited to share this emotional response, as the series' usual excessiveness of imagery and referentiality is toned down to minimum to translate the parody to a vehicle of emotional sincerity which would otherwise not fit into its sitcom formula. "Kimmy's Roommate Lemonades!" thus takes its cue from musicals (the campiest of genres, see Cohan *Incongruity*; Tinkcom 34-71), insofar as it uses extreme artificiality to express its core concerns and elicit authentic emotionality. Despite their parodic lyrics and visual cheapness, the songs strongly support Titus' (and his inner turmoil's) position as narratively and affectively central; the supposed lead character Kimmy is nowhere to be seen, all present white and straight characters merely function as background dancers to support his "lemonading," and the visuals are as clearly referencing an African American icon as the lyrics are unapologetically queer.<sup>14</sup> Style and extreme stylization here do not trump substance, style becomes substance. This approach is not new to the series, which has relied on musical excerpts before, such as Titus's ode to black penis, "Peeno Noir" (1x06) and his reenactments of failed musicals in "Kimmy Schmidt Gives Up" (2x05). Through Titus, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* thus repeatedly relies, as is typical for camp, on "excessive theatricality and outrageousness as an avenue of heightened emotion" (LaValley 64), which in turn offers a critique of the neglect with which "the marginal" (read: non-straight, non-white) has been and often continues to be treated on TV.

<sup>13</sup> The prior songs are embedded within the narrative despite their title cards, as they end in scenes which continue through dialogue. The final song, however, simply ends with a close-up of Titus.

<sup>14</sup> One stand-out example includes the spoken-word interlude in "Furiosity": "Imagine for a moment that you never came on out / To yourself, still on the shelf, still had that dartboard in your house / Never made it out of Queens, still out there playing all them sports / Never had the flyest tenor in the choir up in your shor-or-orts / Would dudes be into you? Nope, Them gays would spoof on you, goof on you."

## Conclusion: Titus’ Black Camp as Commentary, Critique, and Care

“I can’t fix America,” Titus states in “Kimmy has a Birthday!” (1x09) as he switches the music (per Kimmy’s request) from electronica to “music that has words in it” and “I beat that bitch with a bat” blasts from the speakers. Supposedly, this would be exactly his function as black sidekick and gay BFF, both usually confined to the supporting role of fixing if not America then at least the protagonist, or made to stand in for the non-threatening other of which white, straight protagonists as much as audiences can feel “generously” tolerant. Yet Titus does more than reject this role. With the biting wit that is as much part of camp as is his theatricality (see Babuscio 27), Titus calls out society’s hypocrisy and the reality of living as a marginal figure. He thus illuminates Babuscio’s claim that humor as an element of camp constitutes “a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity” (27).

Titus is not the first black queen to provide such commentary on and critique of the attitude and behavior of his less marginalized contemporaries. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* offers a full array of such characters, *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014) created one of its most beloved figures in LaFayette (cf. Story), and *Angels in America* (HBO, 2003) gave some of its most memorable put-downs to Belize.<sup>15</sup> As such, Titus’s use of camp is not per se singular—it is, however, in the context of a widely available comedy show, in which his character has quickly developed to steal the spotlight from the ostensive lead. Within the sitcom, the intersectionality of categories of differences in his character is as new as is his way of dealing with it. When, for example, Titus realizes he has been given a senior citizen discount on his breakfast orders, he goes on a self-pity rampage which includes walking the streets in a *Cosby*-like sweater (1x05, “Kimmy Kisses a Boy!”). His existential crisis of facing the fact that he might be aging, prompts him to exclaim: “Black, gay, and old. I’m not gonna know which box to check on the hate crime form” (1x05). The unfolding scene contrasts his serious (and seriously true) statement with his first encounter with his future boyfriend Mike. Upon Mike’s attempts at flirtation, Titus rips off his sweater to reveal a T-Shirt with the bright pink slogan “Baby Slut.” The incongruity of these two aspects of his identity adds to the humorous effect of the scene as a whole, but they do not distract from his emphasis on the intersection of discourses of race and sexuality (and in this case age) that doubly marginalize him. The scene paradigmatically illustrates what our analysis in this article has shown: Titus uses camp’s signature combination of humor and sincerity, distance and affect, to counteract the marginalization that the intersection of categories of difference as represented by his character usually implies. It not only allows him to critique representational (and social) limitations, but also to fashion a unique place for himself in the universe of the show and in the hearts of the audience.

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<sup>15</sup> We thank Justyna Wierzchowska for the reminder.

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