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GOOD TIMES FOR FLORIDA AND BLACK FEMINISM

The debate over whether television shapes or follows public opinion has persisted throughout the development of the medium. This is particularly the case when it comes to discussing the intersections of gender, race and class as portrayed by North American situation comedies. Moreover, as marginalized communities assume oppositional stances to media depictions, and advertisers recognize these communities as a marketable demographic, the battle over representation continues unabated. This essay is concerned with the voice of African American women in challenging negative, stereotypical representations of the black female experience of sexism, racism and classism. Given the relative abundance of representations today, and the veritable silence of any large-scale black feminist organizational voice in the U.S. addressing those representations, it is worthwhile at this point to investigate historical attempts to change how the television industry portrayed the African American female experience. Additionally, as gender is a relational, dualistic category, such an interrogation also implicitly addresses representations of the African American male experience and that of the black family unit.

Central to this examination is the impact of 1970s black feminist organizing on the representation of African American women in the sitcom *Good Times*. With the advent of syndication and the proliferation of VHS and DVD sales of older television sitcoms, it becomes imperative to take up the question of how black women contested assertions about black women's relationship to feminism as an ideology and feminism as a lifestyle. How did the central African American female character, Florida Evans, respond to the women's liberation movement that was at its height during the 1974-1979 run of *Good Times*? This essay approaches that question through archival material from

black feminist organizations, in particular the San Francisco/Bay Area-based Black Women Organized for Action, oral history interviews with black women active in black feminist organizations at the time, and analysis of three episodes of the sitcom *Good Times*.

This essay begins with situating the 1974 television debut of *Good Times* in the historical context of the little-known era of formal black feminist organizing, which was concurrent, and not subsequent to predominately white feminist organizing. The analysis then proceeds with a brief overview of “relevance programming” or social realism ideology behind the production of *Good Times*. The final section of this essay then examines the intersection where the show’s fictional narrative, black feminist organizing and the show’s production imperative meet. Black feminist organizing had a direct, unprecedented impact on the portrayal of African American women through dialogue with the show’s producer, Norman Lear, and his production company, Tandem/TAT.

Black feminist organizing in the 1970s

Black feminist organizing emerged as a direct result of the Civil Rights and black liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Black women active in these organizations gained valuable grassroots organizing experience, as well as unique knowledge of the meaning of liberation through their struggles against sexism in Civil Rights organizations led by clergymen and their contemporaries in the student-led black liberation movement.¹ It should be clear, though, that while black women experienced sexism in these movements, they also often held leadership positions denied their white female counterparts. Hence, rather than merely walk behind black men in their quest to reassert patriarchy through a framework of “rights,” black women continually waged a struggle for the complete and full participation of both genders on behalf of the black community.

Similarly, black women experienced racism in the women’s movement, but they did not merely cede the movement to the interests of white feminists. Black women were active, often founding members, of organizations traditionally thought to be entirely composed of white women, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and other more radical, local women’s liberation groups [Ibid.].² As a result, a number of black feminist organizations

1. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: the Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984); Kimberly Springer, “Politics in the Cracks: the Interstitial Politics of Black Feminist Organizations,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race and Transnationalism* (2001): 155-191.

formed across the U.S., though mainly based on the east and west coasts of the country. Some of them included: the Third World Women's Alliance, the National Black Feminist Organization, the Combahee River Collective, the National Alliance of Black Feminists, and Black Women Organized for Action.

These organizations had in common, along with the mandate to end racism and sexism, the goal of confronting and dispelling negative stereotypes about African American women. These stereotypes ran the gamut from the asexual, service-oriented Mammy figure made popular in television shows such as *Beulah* (1950-1953) and *Gimme a Break!* (1981-1987) to the recurring "black bitch" character seen in shows such as *Amos n' Andy* (1951-1953), *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), and *Martin* (1992-1997).³ Black women did not fare any better on the larger silver screen, but television was a medium much more accessible to working poor black audiences. Moreover, images of black women servants, smart-mouthed black women, or both (smart-mouthed black women servants) did little to depict the range of emotional expression and work capabilities of over half the members of the black population.

At the forefront of black feminist organizing was the need for self-definition. In their mission statement, the National Black Feminist Organization, based in New York City with chapters throughout the U.S., encapsulated the feelings of black women tired of media perpetuated mistreatment and negative images:

Black women want to be proud, dignified, and free from all those definitions of beauty and womanhood that are unrealistic and unnatural. We, not white women or black men, must define our own self-image as black women and not fall into the mistake of being placed upon the pedestal which is even being rejected by white women. It has been hard for black women to emerge from the myriad of distorted images that have portrayed us as grinning Beulahs, castrating Sapphires, and pancake-box Jemimas. As black feminist we realized the need to establish ourselves as an independent black feminist organizations.⁴

Though they were merely images, stereotypes had a lasting resonance rooted in capitalist marketing that sought ways to peddle the feeling of down home cooking and comfort at the expense of black women.⁵ Moreover, negative images of black women on television buttressed public policy that sought

2. See also: Wini Breines, "What's Love Got to Do with It?: White Women, Black Women, and Feminism in the Movement Years," *Signs* (2002): 1095-1133; Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies* (Summer 2002): 337-360.

3. Black feminists were not dissatisfied with all of the few images of black women on television. For example, the was the lesser problematic character of Diahann Carroll's nurse and single mother *Julia* (1968-1971).

4. National Black Feminist Organization, "Statement of Purpose" (New York, 1973).

5. Phil Patton, "Mammy: Her Life and Times," *American Heritage* (1993): 78-87.

to characterize black women as castrating matriarchs who were encouraging pathology in black families with their domineering ways.⁶

The National Black Feminist Organization went public with their disdain for stereotypes of black women, holding press conferences in three cities, Atlanta, Detroit and Washington, D.C. Two accounts, one in the mainstream *The Atlanta Journal* and the other in the black press newspaper *Atlanta Daily World* provide compelling insight into responses to black women's claims based on the focus of the articles. Headlined, " 'That's My Mama:' Black Women Assail TV Show as 'Demeaning,' " *The Atlanta Journal* depicted the NBFO as merely a group of complaining black women upset about one show.

The sitcom, *That's My Mama*, featured Clifton Davis as Clifton Curtis, a single man who inherits his father's barbershop. His mother, Eloise Curtis (portrayed by film and stage actress Theresa Merritt), makes constant demands for him to live his life the way that *she* sees fit. That includes settling down and giving her grandchildren—except when, as in one episode, a woman approaches Clifton with a child she says is his. Bogle notes about Merritt's role, "Merritt wasn't a bad actress. But large, fulsome, and brown-skinned, she fit the physical image of the acceptable, nurturing, seemingly sexless black television mother."⁷ The one difference between this show and its predecessors was that, for once, a black woman was allowed to play the Mammy to her *own* family and not a white one.

Following an advertisement for the show's network, day and time, *The Atlanta Journal's* Bill Montgomery explained, "The program portrays black women as domineering, conniving or domestic oriented and as little more than stereotyped objects for comedy, complained Sandra Hollin Flowers, head of the organization's Atlanta chapter."⁸ With a "no comment" from *That's My Mama's* network, ABC, and a note that there had been, according to ABC no complaints from a "racial angle" about the show, Montgomery goes on create his own comparison: "Although white, middle-aged fathers are also often portrayed as foolish incompetents, 'white males run just about everything and can afford to be ridiculed,' Ms. Flowers contented. 'Third World characters such as Indians and Orientals are shown on the tube as either ridiculous or having exaggerated powers, à la Kung Fu,' she added."

6. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: the Case for National Action" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965).

7. Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 208.

8. Bill Montgomery, " 'That's My Mama:' Black Women Assail TV Show as 'Demeaning,' " *The Atlanta Journal* (4 October 1974), National Black Feminist Organization Papers, University of Illinois at Chicago Special Collections Library.

Particularly when juxtaposed with the *Atlanta Daily World's* coverage, Montgomery's article for *The Atlanta Journal* frames the NBFO's issue as one of a sole show that happened to offend a few black women's sensibilities. As the ABC spokesman could cite no other complaints, Flowers and the NBFO are set up as an isolated group of feminists who, typical for feminists, cannot take a joke. After all, Montgomery asserts, white men are negatively portrayed on television. Though this may be true—that *Andy Griffith's* Barney Fife could be equally offensive to bug-eyed deputies—there is no context or precedence for this comparison, other than to establish that these feminists, and black feminists at that, are being hypersensitive. After all, *That's My Mama* is only a TV show—and a short-lived one at that.

Interestingly, the *Atlanta Daily World*, the nation's oldest African American newspaper, reported the skirmish over *That's My Mama* as a side note to the larger issue the NBFO addressed in their news conference comments. Rather than portraying the NBFO as assailing one sitcom and one network, the *Atlanta Daily World's* headline read, "TV Sexism, Racism Hit By Feminists," and noted that the NBFO was denouncing the entire "television industry for being 'more motivated by profit than social responsibility.'"⁹ The *Atlanta Daily World* enumerated the NBFO's specific grievances in their entirety:

Blacks [sic] shows are slanted toward the ridiculous with no redeeming counterimages.

When blacks are cast as professional people, the characters they portray generally lack professionalism and give the impression that black people are incapable and inferior in such positions.

Few black women on TV are cast as professionals, para-professionals or even working people.

Black children, by and large, have no worthy role models on television.

It is only after detailing these issues—that notably are not only concerned with black women's depictions—that the article moves on to cite *That's My Mama* as evidence for NBFO's claims. Further, in this newspaper's coverage, Flowers is quoted as noting that none of the characters are particularly redeeming. She is careful to note, though, that she is not suggesting that African Americans playing these roles see their careers decline and find themselves unemployed in the industry: "If this was to happen [...] it would serve to confirm the racism which exists in the television industry because it would indi-

9. Staff Writer, "TV Sexism, Racism Hit by Feminists," *Atlanta Daily World* (6 October 1974), National Black Feminist Organization Papers, University of Illinois at Chicago Special Collections Library.

cate that producers and writers [sic] are unable to envision black people in roles that are not stereotypic and demeaning” [Ibid.]. The article concludes with Flowers’s citing examples of programming that reflects African Americans in a more realistic light, including *Room 222*, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *Hall of Anger*, *Sesame Street*, and *Zoom*.

The black press’s coverage of the NBFO conference is markedly different from that of the mainstream press in that it frames the feminist organization’s concerns as rectifiable grievances, rather than complaining for the sake of complaining. The NBFO’s grievances, as depicted in the *Atlanta Daily World*, are more extensive than in *The Atlanta Journal*. *The Atlanta Journal* characterizes the goal of the press conference as to have ABC pull *That’s My Mama* from the airwaves—in short, a demand for censorship. The *Atlanta Daily World*, however, makes no mention of this demand, instead citing the goal of the press conference as, “To improve the quality of television programming, particularly as it reflects the lives of black people” [Ibid.].

It is difficult to ascertain whether the NBFO actually demanded the removal of the show from ABC’s programming. However, it is worth noting that the *Atlanta Daily World*’s portrayal is more in line with archival data that suggests the NBFO was concerned primarily with representations of black women, but also with those of black men and the entire black community. The NBFO, as presented in *The Atlanta Journal*, is infinitely more selfish on behalf of black women than is characteristic for an organization whose mandate was about black women as their well-being as it connected to black people as a whole. Despite varying results, black feminist organizations found that publicly addressing issues of racism and sexism in television was, in fact, a viable avenue for self-definition, community dialogue, and social change at the institutional and societal levels.

Black women come of age in relevance programming

It is safe to assert that there were more roles for black women on television in the 1970s than at any other time period in the medium’s young history. In the nation’s city streets and on the small screen, African Americans demanded better treatment and equal rights commensurate to their status as full citizens of the United States. In the social sciences, the times demanded attention to people’s, or social, history—history told from the “bottom up.” On television, this demand was met with an industry push toward something called alternately, “relevance programming,” “social realism,” or “quality television.” At the forefront of this type of programming were producers Bud Yorkin and Norman Lear’s independent production unit, Tandem/TAT. Tandem was one

of two production companies CBS engaged to recoup television's image as a useful, socially responsible medium.¹⁰

Lentz notes in her extensive study of race and feminism in relevance programming that Tandem, along with MTM Enterprises, was "credited with transforming the situation comedy, making it more complex and more responsive to the social and political changes resulting from the Civil Rights and black power movements and the burgeoning feminist movement [...] the shows produced by Tandem/TAT ignited a massive nationwide discussion about the appropriate modes of representing race and racism" [Ibid. 46]. Tandem ignited this discussion through shows such as *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *The Jeffersons*, *Maude* (1972-1978), and *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977). These shows dealt with issues at macro- and micro-levels of U.S. society, ranging from racism, sexism, feminism, political corruption in Nixon's White House, the Vietnam War, and gasoline shortages. Through this subject matter, intentionally or not, Tandem's productions embodied the feminist ethos of the personal as political for women, men and families.

During its run, *Good Times* tackled these issues through the daily struggles of racism and sexism as they intersected with poverty in the lives of the Evans family. Father James, mother Florida, and children James, Jr. (J.J.), Thelma, and Michael work, in conjunction with neighbor Willona, to make ends meet on Chicago's Southside. Audiences expected *Good Times*, as a sitcom, to deliver laughs, and the show's writers and actors managed to do this despite the weighty subject matter of unemployment, child abuse, sexual assault, death, substandard housing, as well as the consistent efforts of the family to better themselves and their lot in life through religious dedication and education.

Unique to *Good Times*, or perhaps counter to dominant perceptions and statistics about single female-headed households, the show presented an intact nuclear family for its first two seasons, until James's death—more specifically, the actor John Amos being written out of the script. Also, counter to stereotypes, the oldest son J.J. was not leading a wayward life of crime of pimping or drugs, sister Thelma was far from prostitution in her aspirations for higher education, and the youngest child Michael evaded drug dealing. Husband James, though sometimes unemployed, was a physically and mentally present black male figure for his children and wife.

10. Kirsten Marthe Lentz, "Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television," *Camera Obscura: a Journal of Feminism and Film Theory* (2000): 44-93. The other company was Grant Tinker's MTM Enterprises, responsible for such shows as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda* and *Phyllis*. MTM's shows seemed more concerned with embodying the politics of the times in its characters, rather than confronting the social issues of the day directly.

The weak link of representation seemed to be the Florida Evans character. Playing the lead female character in the show, Esther Rolle faced the expectations of black audiences, but particularly black women who were increasingly sensitized to issues of representation through the contemporary women's movement.¹¹ Even if black women resisted feminist organizing, it is unlikely that they could remain unaware of feminist ideas and protests against media-generated beauty standards that held white women as the paragon of beauty. There were material and psychological costs to engaging in feminist activism, but these did not stop black women from participating in feminist activism. Black women, such as this organizer, were learning to demand more of entertainment. Yet, like Sandra Hollin Flowers of the NBFO, black feminists did not demand that Esther Rolle and other actors forfeit their work, but they did attempt to make demands of, in this case, *Tandem* for a fuller portrayal of African American women through the character Florida Evans.

Good Times was a spin-off of *Tandem's* *Maude*, which featured Bea Arthur as the title, feminist character and Florida Evans as her maid.¹² But, in the initial episodes of *Good Times*, Florida Evans is a stay-at-home mother with an underemployed husband. This would seem, given stereotypes of black women as single, working mothers, an improvement or at least ascension to the white woman's role as stay-at-home mother. Yet, black feminists perceived a lack of realism, as the majority of black women had to, out of economic necessity, work to provide two incomes for the survival of black families long before white families felt this financial squeeze. Racism often impeded the earning power of black men so, to black feminists, Florida's ability to remain in the home tending to her family seemed out of sync with black women's realities of working in domestic service or pink collar positions in the workforce. Former Black Women Organized for Action member Valerie Jo Bradley recalls her organization's initiative in tackling this issue:

One [committee] that I was instrumental in spearheading was [...] the media committee [...] monitoring television for the roles that—to check the roles of black women and programs. *Good Times* was particularly offensive to us. Florida, you know, never had a job. Thelma was bright but she never was given much dialogue. And they had that idiot, fool J.J. doing all that—you know, whatever. So we wrote Norman Lear to complain about it and to give him our statistics on our monitoring after monitoring it from somewhere between six

11. Esther Rolle was often vocal in the press about her role and the direction of the show. The show's writers progressively foregrounded the buffoonish antics of J.J. "Kid Dyn-o-mite" and Rolle briefly left the show in protest. She did return to the show in its last season. With the exception of actor Eriq LaSalle of NBC's *ER*, it is rare for an actor to speak out about the portrayal of their character and African Americans.

12. John Amos appears as Florida's husband, Henry, in the episode of *Maude*.

and nine months.

During the sitcom's run, Florida began leery of feminism but later embraced the women's movement. If we extend our analysis briefly back to Florida Evans's role as Maude's maid, there are early assumptions about black women's antipathy toward feminism. In "Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television," Lentz maintains that feminism is coded as excessive in the figure of Maude. While there is an overarching, more prominent critique of white liberalism in the show, this excessiveness fuels Florida's contested relationship with feminism. In a first season episode entitled "Maude Meets Florida", Lentz notes the ways that Maude's "obsessive need for control over the behavior and political identities of others along with her white liberal guilt in relation to African Americans makes her behave very badly toward Florida" [Lentz 72]. In spite of Florida's resistance, Maude takes Florida on as her pet project, commenting, "Florida is not your modern Negro. She hasn't found that new sense of self-respect and militancy. Let's face it [...] Florida is your preliberation Southern black [...] I intend to treat that woman as an equal. Teach her a new sense of self-respect." Maude's attempts at liberating Florida include prompting Florida to call herself a "housekeeper" and not a "maid" and insisting that Florida use the front door and not the (more convenient to Florida) backdoor because it has "racial overtones" [Lentz 73]. Maude's narrative is one of self-improvement, but a self-improvement directed by white patronage and largesse.

Throughout the episode, Florida's ability to quit working for Maude is foregrounded as Florida's only possible act of resistance and it is one that Maude fears. At episode's end, Florida and Maude have a final confrontation in which Maude claims Florida is "too dumb" to accept Maude's help, but Florida wins the argument by simultaneously asserting her own strength, as well as accepting her position as a subordinate to Maude, Mistress of the Plantation. Lentz concludes from this, and other episodes featuring Maude and Florida's sparring that, "blackness and feminism become quite explicitly opposed: blackness occupies a privileged relation to materiality, while feminism is branded as ridiculously ideological in its absorption with issues of language and representation" [Lentz 74].

This episode of *Maude* prefigures an assumption of race as always prioritized over gender concerns for black women. In its dealings with socially relevant issues, the *Good Times* producers introduced Florida to feminism in a second season episode, "Florida Flips." Aired Fall 1974, the episode opens with Florida buckling under the demands of her husband and children. Not yet employed outside the home, Florida is a rarity: a stay-at-home black mother. Nevertheless, she does not demonstrate Donna Reed aplomb when the

oatmeal burns, J.J. and Thelma are bickering loudly, and James cannot understand why breakfast is not ready as he pushes aside a mound of laundry from the table. Finally reaching her breaking point, Florida slaps her son Michael, the show's Black Nationalist voice. After fleeing the room in tears, Florida later encounters her best friend and neighbor, Willona, who recognizes Florida's frustration. In response, Willona takes Florida to a "Women's Awareness" meeting.

The black women at the meeting appear to represent a range of ideas about who black women are: an older woman who "comically" responds to her husband's violence with violence; a right-on sister wearing an African print dashiki; and other women of various ages and skin tones. One woman claims that her husband, and by default all black men, think the only place for women is in the kitchen and the bedroom, as domestic labor or sexual servants. Florida sits skeptically through the meeting and refuses to discuss the tensions that led her to strike her youngest child. She leaves the meeting concluding that *her* husband respects her in ways that these women will never know.

At home, Florida's family has agreed that Florida is just experiencing some temporary stress and the only thing she needs is a bit of appreciation. However, when Florida reluctantly reveals that she went to a Women's Awareness meeting, James balks at the idea that his wife was sitting around with those "cackling hens" when she has so much work to do at home. James goes as far as to echo the sexist sentiment voiced at the Women's Awareness meeting: "A woman's place is in the kitchen and the bedroom, Florida, the kitchen and the bedroom!" Florida defuses the situation and reduces James's anxiety about women's liberation helping black women displace men from their patriarchal place, with assurances that she does not want to walk in front of him, but rather she wants to walk beside him.

Black Women Organized for Action organizer Aileen Hernandez wrote Tandem producer Norman Lear soon after "Florida Flips" aired. In her letter she praises Lear's Company for its representations of racial and ethnic minorities in its productions but also warns that her organization monitors these representations "with a critical eye."¹³ Because of this critical eye, Hernandez requests a meeting between Tandem and Black Women Organized for Action's Media Committee to discuss "past and projected segments of the show" [Ibid.].

Black Women Organized for Action felt that, while Florida's representation was an improvement over past depictions, more could be done. A sec-

13. Aileen Hernandez, Letter to Norman Lear (9 October 1974), Personal Papers of Aileen Hernandez.

tion of Hernandez's letter is quoted extensively here due to the number of issues it raises about black feminist organizational power and television:

In a recent meeting with Jane Galvin Lewis of the National Black Feminist Organization, I was surprised to learn that she had been told that the Good Times show which dealt with Florida's introduction to feminism had been "cleared" with my organization. As I am sure you know, I have never been in contact with anyone in Lear productions and have had no conversations with anyone in your organization about the show. I assume that the reference was to NOW [National Organization for Women], and I am glad to know that contacts are being made with NOW about the portrayal of women in your shows. However, it is equally important that black women's groups are involved, because so few black women have actually joined NOW or any other national identified feminist groups. Clearly there are many black women who are feminist, but for a variety of reasons they have not felt comfortable about identifying with NOW—projected frequently as white and middle-class, and by implication, potentially, if not actually racist.

Hernandez makes the case for a culturally specific approach that, while not degrading NOW's input, would include the perspectives of black women who may, or may not hold feminist viewpoints. These viewpoints, Hernandez implies, cannot be overlooked because they are marginal to feminist organizations. Should Tandem Productions purport to be on a different, more socially progressive mission than other production companies, the input of Black Women Organized for Action would be imperative to the development of Florida and Thelma's characters. Valerie Jo Bradley recalls:

Norman Lear responded back and invited us to see the operation, meet with the writers. He even asked us to identify black women writers who could bring that sensitivity. He agreed that perhaps he had not paid much attention. So, as a result, Thelma's role expanded and Florida got a job [...] Now I don't know if we did that single handedly, but we certainly did stay on it and Norman Lear did respond.¹⁴

Indeed, there is no archival documentation beyond Hernandez's letter that follows up on the BWOA-Tandem dialogue, however, Florida's understanding of feminism and position as reflective of black women's reality did improve,

Florida makes occasional comments that reflect a feminist awareness of stereotypes about black women and public policy. For example, in "Getting Up the Rent," James forbids Florida, who has been incapacitated by an appendectomy, to go to the welfare office when the Evans family is short on the rent. As James storms out with a pool cue held aloft to raise the rent money through gambling, Florida asks Willona, "Don't all the magazines say *our* women are supposed to be the head of the house?" Willona responds affirmatively, but

14. Valerie Jo Bradley, Interview with author (8 October 1997).

Florida retorts, "Well, somebody should tell that to James." She goes to the welfare office anyway, but is turned down for assistance because the family makes \$100 too much for a family of three children.

This episode aired approximately four months after Black Women Organized for Action's letter and, ostensibly, a meeting between black feminists and Norman Lear's production team. In her commentary, Florida alludes to the proliferation of reports that black women are matriarchs and a disproportionate number of female-headed households account for the black community's "culture of poverty." Florida subtly pokes fun at this cultural explanation for her family's predicament that ignores the structural wage discrimination her husband encounters despite working two jobs to support his family.¹⁵

Two episodes continued the feminist narrative: 1975's "Florida Goes to School" and 1976's "Florida the Woman." Both episodes demonstrated a shift in Florida's attitude toward feminism's goals and perhaps, reflected black women's growing understanding of feminist principles expressed by black women. Additionally, these episodes continue to depict James as unwilling participant in his wife's liberation.

James initially balks at Florida's decision to return to school for her high school equivalency diploma on the grounds that she made the decision without consulting him, but also because her news overshadows his new job promotion (about which he did not consult Florida). Florida chooses to pursue this path of self-improvement—a path she rejected two years earlier when it was forced upon her by Maude's feminism. But, at this point, Florida recognizes her position in a socially and economically stratified society: "I've got it worst of all. I'm black. I'm a woman. I've got no diploma. In the job market, that makes me low-priced spread!" Embedding her awareness in her role as a wife and mother familiar with the basics of a market economy as supermarket, Florida makes a case for returning to school despite her husband's concerns about who will cook, clean and care for the family. In a telling scene, James accuses Willona of filling Florida's head with this back-to-school nonsense. In response, Willona adopts the pose of a dimwitted plantation slave, who knows no better than he about the world. Such a pose reveals James, like Maude, to be asserting his form of privilege (patriarchy) over Florida's life.

School does change Florida as, in her excitement about new knowledge, she constantly corrects James's grammar and tries to give him childrearing

15. Florida also demonstrates an increased political consciousness in a November 1975 episode called "Florida's Protest," in which she and other mothers protest high prices and inferior product at a grocery store that is managed by an African American, but owned by an unseen, white proprietor.

tips. Asserting that her schooling is taking them in opposite directions as a couple, James storms out to the neighborhood bar. While there he meets a friend, Willie, whose wife entered therapy, developed a critique of Willie's sexist attitudes, and divorced him. Meanwhile, as James mulls over this potential effect of women's liberation, Florida decides to quit school because of the rift it is causing in her marriage. Eventually, James returns home having recognized his selfishness and fear of something he didn't understand. He brings Florida a new book bag, as well as one for himself; he, too, decides to attend school for his high school diploma: "Things have changed. I'm gonna have to change with 'em. Now we're going in the same direction." James's change of heart appears to concede to the idea that he, too, can gain something from Florida's take on self-improvement and liberation.

Florida's emancipation continues in "Florida the Woman." Florida is now working outside the home and dealing with the multiple tasks expected of wives, mothers, and workers. James is demanding she replace a button on his shirt, Michael needs help with a permission slip for a school trip, Thelma's dress for school isn't ironed, and J.J. has a steady stream of jokes about the oatmeal Florida burned. The scenario is much like that in the second season "Florida Flips" episode, but this time, she does not slap her son. Instead, Florida departs with an impassioned refusal to "do all the chores and be mother, housewife, diplomat, seamstress, referee, counselor, cook, and sparing partner with no pay and no fringe benefits." The audience breaks into a chorus of applause and women's shouts of "Right-on!" At the elevator, Florida quips to Willona, "Oh, Abe freed the slaves, but he forgot about me!"

At work, Florida changes her mind about lunching with her handsome boss, Oscar, and takes him up on his offer. The luncheon reveals Florida to be unworldly when she consistently violates rule of custom at a Japanese restaurant. To put herself at ease, Florida drinks a bit too much sake and returns home in a wonderful mood—a mood that makes James suspicious. Oscar shows up at the Evans residence with Japanese tea roses and incites James's jealousy. After he leaves, Florida explains to James that the reason she was in such a good mood was not solely because of her boss's good looks, but because he treated her like a woman deserving courtesy, kindness, thoughtfulness, and attention. James replies, "I thought you didn't go for all that stuff no more, not with all that women's lib jive and all that." Florida responds that, to the contrary, "women's lib don't mean we want to stop being women. It just means we want our chance in this world, too."

One of the black community's primary concerns about the women's movement was that it would divert black women's activist energies from the Black Liberation Movement. Another concern was that such participation, or

adherence to feminist ideology, would drive a rift between black women and men just as they were experiencing a renaissance in black male/female relationships.¹⁶ These two later *Good Times* episodes encapsulate the thoughts of many black women on feminism. Florida's character attempts to explain feminism to herself, as well as to her husband. In that explanation, she relays the thoughts of Black Women Organized for Action and the National Black Feminist Organization; black feminism was not about dividing women and men, but about helping black women improve themselves and, through that improvement, sustain the black community. Playing on notions of women as culture bearers, Tandem Productions shaped Florida Evans as a character that fears feminism, but eventually embraces the ideology for what it offers her as a sensual, heterosexual woman, but also as a worker, mother and wife. Such a shift reflects the interplay between Tandem's goal of socially relevant and realistic television, black feminist organizational demands, and shifting representations of black women in American sitcoms.

16. Toni Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," *New York Times* (22 August 1971): 14-15, 63-64, 66.