

NY Times Guest Essay

Why ‘Atlanta’ Is the Blackest Show Ever

Nov. 11, 2022

From left, LaKeith Stanfield, Donald Glover and Brian Tyree Henry of “Atlanta.” Credit...Guy D'Alema/FX



•
• • •

By Touré

Touré is a TV host and the creative director at TheGrio.

I can't remember exactly when I realized "Atlanta," which ended its four-season run Thursday night on FX, was the Blackest show in TV history. It was probably in the midst of "Rich Wigga, Poor Wigga" the episode in which high school kids, in order to qualify for a college scholarship that a wealthy Black man is giving out, have to take a test to prove their Blackness. Black people love to talk about what's Blacker than what or who's Blacker than who because, for many of us, Blackness is more than an ethnicity; it's a religion we love to praise. "Atlanta" took the notion of a racial test to the nth degree, in a way that was funny but also loving. In fact, the whole show is a love letter to hip-hop culture, the city of Atlanta and Blackness itself.

The scholarship test is administered by a tribunal of three middle-aged Black men who ask applicants questions about the nitty-gritty of Blackness to prove that they understand the culture. One of the key evaluations is, "What happened to that boy at Lenox mall." One applicant, a biracial boy who is white-passing and does not embrace Black culture, answers with facts: "A police officer killed him in a routine traffic stop." Wrong. "I didn't say, 'What happened to that boy at Lenox mall?'" the examiner intones. "I said, 'What happened to that boy at Lenox mall.'" The divining rod was this: Could you hear that he was not asking for information but instead was commenting on the pain of yet another shooting? The correct answer was, "Mm-mm-mmm. Damn shame."

Blackness is, of course, too complex to be quantified in a test, so some students who are Black don't pass. The biracial boy and an African immigrant fail, and they're so angry about it that they return to the school later that night, intent on revenge, ready to burn the facility to the ground with flamethrowers. Cops arrive. The immigrant gets shot. As he lies on a hospital gurney, the wealthy Black patron arrives and tells him, "Getting shot by the police is the Blackest thing anybody can do." He gives the boy a scholarship. I don't know if that's really the Blackest thing someone can do, but that line is laugh-to-keep-from-crying funny. And that's a big part of why "Atlanta" is the Blackest show ever: It captures the surrealism of Black life in America, the sense of irrationality that warps our days.

Black people know that just by walking down the street, you can fall through any number of trapdoors that lead to a bizarro world where up is down and your life is in danger. You can be bird-watching in Central Park like [Christian Cooper](#), and then the next thing you know, a white woman is calling 911 and saying you're threatening her. You can be jogging in Georgia like Ahmaud Arbery when three men start chasing you in trucks and suddenly you're running for your life. Even if things don't spiral that far out of control, Black people are often assumed to be someone we are not. Even if you've got on a suit, you may be a street criminal, so you're vulnerable to cops and Karens alike. When you get to your job, some people will assume you got it because of affirmative action or diversity initiatives. At any moment, you may be assumed to be intellectually below average and, at the same time, hyperproficient in sports, dancing and sex.

Black life can often seem like a house of mirrors: A situation feels racist, but when you look again, you're not really sure. You don't have a way to X-ray white hearts, so now you're calculating — are the store clerks ignoring you because they don't expect a Black person to have enough money to buy anything, or are they genuinely busy? Did you get this table in the corner because the restaurant doesn't want Black people to be prominent, or is this the only table that's open? Did you not get the promotion because of racism, or is that younger, less-experienced

white person actually better? Is that cop following you because ...? All that analyzing can drive you mad.

The constant surrealism of Blackness — the way I fear the cops more than the criminals, the way I feel racism stalking me throughout my day like a horror-flick monster even if I'm not certain it's there — all of it leads me to crave oases away from the chaos and uncertainty. We need safe spaces where we can recover.

Years ago, I was taught the value of Black safe spaces when I was writing a [story](#) for Rolling Stone about the Black Lives Matter movement. In my time with B.L.M. members, I learned that they very consciously prioritized self-care as a bulwark against the impact of racism on their spirit. They knew that if they didn't regularly take time out to heal, they wouldn't last in the long battle against white supremacy. To them, self-care could be any activity that soothes. For the group of B.L.M.ers I hung out with in Washington, D.C., it meant going to a nearby park, choosing a small space off to the side, putting up signs saying "Black-only space" and sitting there in peace among Black friends and family.

That sort of self-segregation can be so valuable. When we remove the aggravations of dealing with whiteness — the microaggressions, the silly questions, the lack of perspective, the otherization — only then we can truly relax. For me, "Atlanta" was a safe space like that. It was a Blackcentric world that embraced the complexity of our culture and generally ignored whiteness. There are no recurring white characters, and the main characters rarely interact with white people at all. Watching "Atlanta" made me feel at home. By embracing the surrealism of Black life, the show confirmed that we're not crazy to think the world is crazy. Like no other show, "Atlanta" made me feel seen.

"Atlanta" is the child of French New Wave cinema and Jordan Peele's films and hip-hop culture and "Adventure Time" and old Kanye, a polyglot mix of influences boiled down into an amazing gumbo that has fed my soul. It's as unapologetically Black as "Before I Let Go" by Frankie Beverly and Maze or a gigantic Afro or an Amy Sherald painting or Michael Jordan smoothly flying through the air.

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of an Atlanta shopping mall. It is Lenox Square, not Lennox.