In Netflix's '#blackAF,' Kenya Barris dares you to laugh at – or with – a black Larry David

Are you prepared to watch a show about a man at the outskirts of the black experience – stupidly rich, possibly unlikeable and not at all relatable?

To be black in America gives one the ever-present feeling that you have to explain or excuse why you are occupying spaces that are meant – or feel as though they are meant – solely for white people, crouched in a posture of defensive vigilance, susceptible to the intended occupiers' insults, condescension or violence when our bodies occupy those spaces. When those spaces are particularly wealthy, there's the expectation that you'll be additionally subjected to a host of snide insults or barbs aimed at your expressions of race, while asked to both stand in for all members and be able to joke about how you aren’t like “those people.”
This is all the frame for the new Netflix series “#blackAF,” from Kenya Barris, the creator/showrunner of ABC’s “Black-ish”. But where “Black-ish” was a more traditional sitcom centered on a fictional upper-middle-class family (based on Barris’ own) confronting issues of race with humor and heart, “#blackAF” is more “Modern Family” meets “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” with Barris as the Larry David analogue — and super conscious of the fact that these conventions are seldom afforded to black-centered stories or characters.

The conceit of the show is this: the second-oldest daughter, Drea, is applying to New York University’s film’s school by making a documentary about her family. Her father, a successful television creative, exuberantly indulges said favorite daughter’s passion by hiring a film crew and kitting her out with the latest gear to film her family.

The Barrises, though, are unicorns in more ways than one: they don’t exist in community with other black families with their level of financial prosperity, and they are one of a small number of black families in the white Hollywood circles in which they do exist. That singularity of the Barris family in “#blackAF,” which makes them hyper-visible in both their worlds, plays out over the course of the eight episodes, offering viewers a meta-commentary both about the real-life Barris as a black creative thriving in mostly white Hollywood and how the success of his works (“Black-ish,” “Grown-ish” and “Mixed-ish”) based on his family introduced strains into it.

Barris-as-Barris, of course, constantly frets that “#blackAF” is hyperaware of itself, and if Barris the character is a one-trick pony. And the white gaze haunts him — and, by extension, Drea, who in her role as primary storyteller addresses the (white) audience, explaining black idiosyncrasies, cultural and social sensibilities and aesthetics as Barris’ ABC shows, in part, did.

Part of the context of “#blackAF,” of course, is that it is first part of Barris’ multimillion deal with Netflix after his relationship with ABC ended. That relationship soured shortly after a politically charged episode dealing with the controversy over Colin Kaepernick and the NFL was scrapped; both parties later agreed publicly that not airing the “kneeling” episode was a mutual decision. For ABC executives, though, having one of its sitcoms — even one called “Black-ish” — directly address the meaning of Kaepernick’s protest seemed to be a bridge too far; Barris inked a deal with Netflix just six months later.
“The testing kept saying white viewers were uncomfortable,” Barris told Vulture in 2018. “And I was like, ‘Wow, you mean the episode about how talking about slavery makes white people uncomfortable is actually making white people uncomfortable?’ Shock!”

It is not hard to imagine that at least some of “#blackAF” is Barris’ direct response to that controversy; certainly, the fact that all the titles of all episodes of season one involve the phrase “because of slavery” seem to be a direct middle finger to ABC and the white gaze.

Black comedy made for mainstream audiences necessarily contextualizes blackness for white people because the conception of black people in America (and as represented in film and television) is rooted in virulent misconceptions of black humanity. As a result, black people end up explaining themselves to themselves – and by extension, we are telling white people who they are, because they created and maintained those misconceptions.

As entertaining as “#blackAF” is in many moments, though – and the most relatable bits for the vast majority of African American audiences will be the touchstones and celebration of Black identity like Juneteenth, signatures of Barris’ other works – the show is mostly just escapism for millions of African Americans who will never know such opulent abundance. The wealth gap between black and white Americans is a grand canyon: The median wealth for white families is just over $100,000, while the median wealth for black families is $10,000, according to a recent study by Duke University professor William Darity and others.

The real question "#blackAF" raises, though is: Is the world ready for a black Larry David? Is it – are we – ready to watch black humanity at the outskirts of the black experience – stupidly rich, possibly unlikeable, not truly relatable? If a show isn’t crafted for the white gaze, does it automatically speak to the black one?

Perhaps Barris’s greatest trick here is that the answers to those questions don’t matter (at least to him): Those of us who exist on the edges of the “in crowd” and are constantly proving to ourselves and others that we belong in any space in which we occupy have stories worth telling, he says, regardless of the race or class of whoever is watching.

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