

Wydanie w otwartym dostępie na licencji CC BY

This is an open access article under the CC BY license



Rafał Kuś  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2930-6447>

Uniwersytet Jagielloński
Instytut Amerykanistyki i Studiów Polonijnych
rafal.kus@uj.edu.pl

“ROOTS”: THE SIGNIFICANCE, IMPACT, AND LEGACY OF AN ABC MINISERIES

Almost half a century after the show’s premiere in January 1977, the ABC mini-series “Roots” remains present in the national consciousness of the United States. The program, based on an acclaimed yet controversial book by African American author Alex Haley, told the dramatic stories of generations of his ancestors, beginning with a young Mandinka warrior named Kunta Kinte, who was kidnapped and brought as a slave from what is now The Gambia to the British colonies in North America. Both the content and the form of the show included many firsts for American television, and its airing was a major media and social event. The aim of this paper is to analyze the phenomenon of the series’ popularity and critical reception, its influence on the racial relations and perception of historical occurrences in America, and the place it holds now in the cultural and political discourse of the United States.

Due to the peculiar character of its subject matter, the method chosen for this project was qualitative case study research (Wimmer, Dominick, 2016, pp. 143–147). Defined by one author as an “empirical inquiry that uses multiple sources of evidence to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 2003, p. 13), case study approach allows researchers to use a wide spectrum of data that is available to thoroughly explain a given problem. In this project, the research material included recordings of “Roots” and associated series, multiple press and Internet resources, and scholarly works on the subject. The individual techniques employed in this study included audiovisual analysis (Benshoff, 2016, pp. 93–97), discourse analysis (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2006, p. 21) as well as secondary analysis of archived data (Corti, Thompson, 2012, p. 1).

The Saga and the Series

While it is technically true that before there was “Roots” the miniseries, there had been “Roots. The Saga of an American Family” the book, the work on both parts of the franchise overlapped for some time: “by the time Haley finished his epic book, [producer Stan] Margulies and head screenwriter Bill Blinn had been working for over a year to adapt the story for television” (Delmont, 2016, p. 103). The story itself had been developed by Alex Haley, already an accomplished author known for his groundbreaking “Autobiography of Malcolm X” (Haley, 1965), since the early 1960s. Haley had been sharing results of an ongoing investigation into his family’s past on lecture circuit in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For the African American writer, it was both a sentimental journey and a steady source of income (thanks to advance sales of “every possible permutation of the story he hoped to tell”) (Castleman, Podrazik, 2016, p. 265), for the American Broadcasting Company – a chance to strengthen its newly gained top position in the ratings race against CBS and NBC.¹

Haley claimed that the narrative presented in his book was based on meticulous investigation conducted in archives and during field research, including visiting the village of Juffure in The Gambia, where he allegedly met a *griot* (tribal historian), who told him a story – long held in the collective memory of his people – of a teenager who had disappeared from the area and had never been heard from again, many generations earlier. In reality, Haley’s research was far from diligent and many of his findings did not hold up to serious scholarly scrutiny. Matthew F. Delmont suggests that while “much [...] was true; other parts were exaggerated, embellished, or fabricated” (Delmont, 2016, p. 1). The book became also the subject of two copyright infringement lawsuits, of which one was settled out of court (Haley admitted that some fragments and motifs of Harold Courlander’s 1967 book “The African” were used in his work and paid the original author \$650,000).

The series, from the very beginning designed and produced to be a major hit for the ABC network’s season 1976/1977, featured an ensemble cast including veteran TV stars such as Ed Asner, best known as the grumpy yet lovable boss from “Mary Tyler Moore Show,” Lorne Greene (the patriarch of the Cartwright family from “Bonanza,” here cast against type), John Amos (then of “Good Times” fame), Louis Gosset Jr. (a versatile stage, movie, and television thespian who would go on to win an Academy Award in 1982), Lloyd Bridges (an accomplished dramatic and comedic actor), and O.J. Simpson, football star turned actor (years before his legal notoriousness). The brightest star of the show and the actor to be most associated with the series for decades to come was however LeVar Burton, a 19-year-old

¹ ABC, which had been for decades trailing behind competing networks of the “Big Three,” finally caught up with the industry leaders in the second half of the 1970s. Reasons included the audience’s being satiated with the established stars of other networks and advertisers trying to reach the typically younger demographics of ABC viewers.

sophomore at the University of Southern California, whose previous acting experience had been limited to a part in a campus production of “Oklahoma!” His performance was nonetheless crucial for the overall success of the series: “if the audiences did not like and sympathize with Kunta Kinte, you could throw the rest of the series out the window because nobody was going to be watching” (Delmont, 2016, p. 107).

The decision to use a miniseries as a vehicle for Alex Haley’s saga television adaptation is often credited with the genre’s establishment and proliferation in American television. It might be argued that the format is best defined simply “as a program with a continuing story line that runs over a number of episodes” (Terrace, 2021, p. 1), however other defining traits of miniseries have been proposed as well. Author Francis Wheen argues that the crucial feature of the genre is the development of characters as “both soap operas and primetime series [...] cannot afford to allow their leading characters to develop, since the shows are made with the intention of running indefinitely” (*Museum of Broadcast Communications*), while many others pointed out to a specific number of episodes a program should have to be classified as such. It had been traditionally a staple of British TV (as it was a most useful platform for classic literature adaptations, which corresponded well with the Reithian² idea that the BBC’s mission is to enlighten the audience)³ but for many years the miniseries format hadn’t seemed to be a viable option to network programmers in the United States. The commercial nature of the American broadcasting was deemed not compatible enough with productions that had definite endings as it was much more difficult to continue the show when the story arc was over (and the ratings were still good).

“Roots” was not the first miniseries to grace the U.S. programming schedules, as ABC enjoyed much success with productions such as “Rich Man, Poor Man” (a fictional story set in post-World War II America) and “Eleanor and Franklin” (based on the relationship of Eleanor Roosevelt and President Franklin D. Roosevelt) performing strongly in the ratings already in 1976. It may be also argued that it was “the success of British miniseries on PBS” that “paved the way for their use on commercial television” (Sterling, Kittross, 2002, p. 436); since the early 1970s the Public Broadcasting Service has aired many imported (mainly BBC-made) productions of the genre in its “Masterpiece Theatre” series (Kuś, 2013, pp. 117–119). “Roots” was, however, the first show of its format to change the perception of network programmers and establish miniseries as a usable choice for prime time television. More such series followed in the subsequent years, including “Shogun” (1980), “The Thorn Birds” (1983), and “The Winds of War” (1983).

² John Reith was a key figure in BBC’s early history, serving between 1922 and 1938 as general manager and later director-general of the broadcasting institution. He “had no sympathy with the view that it is the task of the broadcaster to give the customer what he wants” (Burns, 1977, p. 36) and was a champion of the paternalistic model of broadcasting.

³ A character on a U.S. sitcom once said, very accurately: “British television gives you closure.”

The story presented in the miniseries opens with a beautiful scene of a child being born in a peaceful, happy village in West Africa. The boy, whom we get to know in the subsequent scenes as Kunta Kinte, grows up in a loving family but his fate soon takes a sinister turn. Captured by slavers, he is put aboard slave ship *Lord Ligonier* and transported to North America. Proud and unable to resign himself to life in slavery, Kunta undertakes several unsuccessful escape attempts and is cruelly punished each time. Eventually, he is mutilated by his captors who chop off a part of Kunta's foot in order to prevent him from running away ever again. This breaks the African's spirit; Kunta Kinte (now known as Toby, a name his master gave him) ostensibly submits to servitude and marries a fellow slave, Bell. Together they have a daughter, Kizzy.

Growing up, Kizzy forms an unlikely friendship with her master's daughter, Missy Anne, who secretly teaches her how to read. This has unfortunate consequences when Kizzy forges a travelling pass for another slave. As a punishment, she is sold to another plantation, to the despair of her parents and indifference of Missy Anne.⁴ Raped already on the first night there by her new master, Kizzy gives birth to George. Kunta Kinte's grandson grows up to be a flamboyant young man with a talent and passion for training roosters for cockfighting, earning the nickname "Chicken George." Later, after his master loses a cockfighting bet, he sends George to England to train cocks for his rival and reluctantly promises to free him upon his return.

Chicken George comes back to the United States many years later and is indeed given his freedom. He learns, however, that Kizzy has recently died and his wife and children (including Tom, a blacksmith) were sold to another master in North Carolina. He goes there but is not able to stay, due to a law stipulating that a freedman loses his freedom again if he stays in the state for 60 days, and heads north. Meanwhile, the Civil War starts, and at the Harvey plantation, where Tom and his family live, arrives an indigent white couple, George and Martha Johnson, whom they befriend. Near the end of the war, Tom kills a Confederate deserter, who had harassed his family earlier and attempted to rape his wife.

The series finale begins with the joyous announcement of freedom for slaves as the Confederacy has lost the war. The plight of the African American community has not changed much though, as they are still intimidated and oppressed by their former masters. Eventually, the black farmers use cunning (and the help of George Johnson) to defeat their white-hooded, Ku-Klux-Klan-like enemies, led by the brother of the Confederate soldier killed by Tom. With the help of Chicken

⁴ From this moment on, the narrative shifts its focus from Kunta to Kizzy and her progeny. Commenting on this, Alison Landsberg makes an interesting observation: "By concentrating on Kunta Kinte's story, Haley makes the character's ultimate absence seem all the more traumatic. The rupture that thwarts the expectations of the narrative structurally repeats the experience of slavery: those sold away never returned" (Landsberg, 2004, p. 101).

George, they move to Tennessee to start a new life. “Roots” ends with a slideshow of photos linking characters of the program to the book’s author, Alex Haley.

One of the most unusual aspects of “Roots” as a television program was the series’ high level of violent content and nudity. TV has always been regarded in the United States as a family-friendly medium (Edgerton, 2007, s. 92): it was already in 1946 that the Federal Communications Commission reminded broadcasters of their social responsibilities in the so-called “Blue Book” and the media industry itself undertook initiatives aimed at mitigating the potential pressure from regulatory authorities by self-censoring programming schedules. The Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters (1951) prohibited stations from airing content of violent, vulgar, or sexual nature, presenting actual criminal techniques, ridiculing lawful authorities, etc. In case of “Roots” the inclusion of several such elements was of course justified by the subject matter (the horrors of the Middle Passage, cruel punishments of slaves – including the infamous Kunta/Toby whipping scene, casual sexual exploitation of slave women), yet it still might be argued that such a show could not have been made merely a decade earlier (the 1970s was a period of relaxation of some of the TV industry’s censorship standards). It might be said as well that a series focusing on the plight of African Americans could not have hit the screens in the 1950s and 60s, as the U.S. television schedules back then were pretty much devoid of significant black protagonists of any sort.⁵

Analysis of the show’s narrative allows to identify some of its predominant themes. “Roots” is a touching story of barely imaginable personal horror, grief, and unhappiness, but at the same time it contains motifs of dignity, hope, and progress. Kunta cherished memories from his motherland, secretly kept his African identity alive, and never gave up his dreams of freedom: “All he ever talked about was running away. Planning and scheming about escaping till the day he died. [...] He kept saying it over and over: ‘kamby bolongo’ [‘river’ in Mandinka language]” (*Roots*, 1977, ep. 6). His fellow slaves and family members were sympathetic with his struggle. After Kunta Kinte was brutally flogged after his first escape attempt and forced to acknowledge his slave name Toby, Fiddler consoled him, saying “What you care what the white man call you. You say Toby. What you care. You know who you be. Kunta. That’s what you always be. Kunta Kinte. There gonna be another day” (*Roots*, 1977, ep. 2). Kunta’s daughter Kizzy, after learning of her father’s death, frantically scraped off the name “Toby” from his wooden tombstone, wrote “Kunta Kinte” instead, and declared: “I promise you, daddy, your dream will not die. Someday, we gonna be free” (*Roots*, 1977, ep. 6).

It should be noticed that African American characters in “Roots” present a wide spectrum of attitudes and strategies of coping with their predicaments. Kizzy, the

⁵ After the initial wave of minority-themed series such as “Amos ’n’ Andy” (CBS, 1951–1953), which did include African American protagonists (albeit portrayed in a harmful, caricatural fashion), black characters had been largely relegated to the background. It was only in the second half of the 1960 that African Americans got any meaningful representation in TV (Allen, Thompson, 2024).

only descendant of Kunta to remain a slave her whole life and a woman undoubtedly traumatized by the cruel and violent actions of her masters, carefully separates the indignities she suffers from her inner world: “The massa can take my body but he can’t touch my spirit. He can’t touch the dream of me of being a free woman” (*Roots*, 1977, ep. 6). She chastens young George for being subservient and breaks up with her lover for the same reason. On the other hand, many slaves depicted in the series make survival their priority – Kizzy’s love interest Sam argues: “Don’t say I ain’t got no dreams. Cause I has. Just ain’t as big as yours and that’s all” (*Roots*, 1977, ep. 6). Chicken George, always an optimistic, entrepreneurial type, well adapted to the oppressive environment he was raised in, declares: “I loves being a cockfighter. I’s proud. Ain’t nobody in the world know them birds better than I do. I’m gonna make a name for myself. Uh, get me some respect. But not by running like your daddy. No, I’m gonna pick them birds until I can buy myself free. And then I’ll look straight ahead. Not over my shoulder” (*Roots*, 1977, ep. 6).

Depictions of white people in the series paint a very diverse picture as well. While many of the series white characters are downright cruel and evil (*Lord Ligonier’s* first mate Slater, John Reynolds, Thomas Moore, George Hamilton) or at least duplicitous and hypocritical (Missy Anne Reynolds, William Reynolds), some of them are of – for one reason or another – a more nuanced nature. *Lord Ligonier’s* captain Davies is perhaps the best example of such a character: “For the first episode, the writers created a conscience-stricken slave captain (Ed Asner), a figure who did not appear in Haley’s novel but was intended to make white audiences feel better about their historical role in the slave trade” (*Museum of Broadcast Communications*). Another case in point would be George Johnson, the once clueless young man who appeared at Tom’s doorstep near the end of the series and eventually became a valued and trusted member of the black community.

Another interesting motif of the series is the notion of progress. While Kunta Kinte’s dreams of freedom were mercilessly crushed by his captors, again and again, his descendants ascended to freedom – be it through individual achievements (Chicken George) or systemic national actions (liberation of slaves after the Civil War). An interesting scene takes place in episode 7 of the series. Chicken George’s son, Tom Harvey returns home to witness his wife being sexually harassed by Jemmy Brent. Doing what would be unimaginable for former generations of his family, he confronts the assailant. While physically struggling with Tom, Jemmy uses improvised weapons that are very symbolic of slavery: first a length of chain and then a hot crowbar (this mirrors scenes from the first episode where Kunta Kinte is chained and branded). Eventually, Tom is able to overpower and kill him.

The final triumph of Kunta Kinte’s family emphasizes the significance of resilience in the face of evil. The theme of overcoming hardships through personal dignity and perseverance might be seen as reminiscent of the African Americans’ struggle for civil rights in the 1950s and 60s, which had been a very recent memory for the miniseries’ audience. The apparent success of Alex Haley’s investigation

into his family’s past was also an exhilarating proof that even the grim dividing line of the Middle Passage could be transcended by a dedicated individual (Haley was no stranger to this trauma as the co-author of the biography of Malcolm X, who had been born as Malcolm Little and later in his life renounced his “slaveholder-imposed” identity).

Roots Remakes TV World in Eight Nights!

The premiere of “Roots” in January 1977 has been described as “a milestone in television history in the USA” (Paterson, 1998, p. 60). It should be noted that even the very decision of the network to schedule the miniseries for eight consecutive nights (from January 23rd to January 30th), instead of placing it in a weekly slot, was unprecedented for an entertainment program (some cases of suspending the regular schedule did happen before in the U.S. television – but only for sports coverage, e.g. of the Olympic Games). Commenting on the success of the show, Paul Monash (vice-president of the competing CBS network) argued that “ABC caused an explosion by compressing the presentation so that the drama had built-in impact [...]. Waiting a week dispels interest; waiting a day heightens interest” (Marmon, 1977). ABC, naturally, did even more to amplify the impact of the broadcast, “encouraging schools and civic groups to participate in special courses and discussions based on the program” (Castleman, Podrazik, 2016, p. 265). The show’s ratings, however, exceeded even the most daring expectations of the network’s programmers: “When the ratings came after the last episode aired on January 30, 1977, Roots was the most watched television series of all time, displacing *Gone with the Wind*. Over one hundred million people saw the final episode, and Roots held seven of the top ten spots on the list of the most viewed shows of all time” (Delmont, 2016, p. 175). The viewing numbers for individual episodes are listed in the following chart:

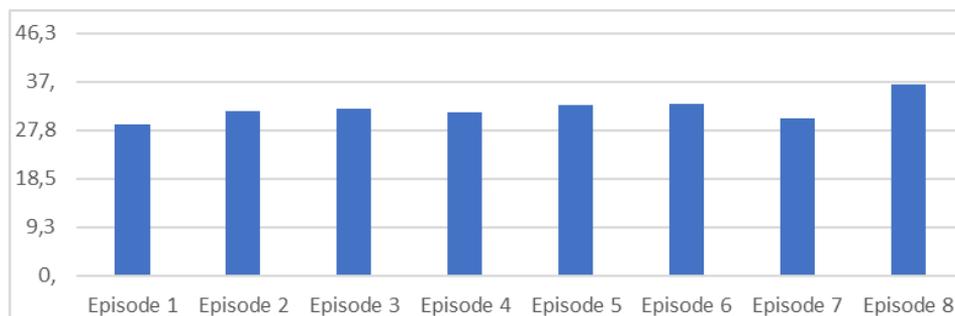


Chart 1. Nielsen ratings for “Roots,” in millions of households

Source: Maglio, 2016.

It is worth to mention that the outstanding rating values enjoyed by “Roots” back in January of 1977 are still very respectable in 2024 as in the contemporary, diversified U.S. media landscape, it is virtually impossible to achieve ratings as high as in the 1970s, when the television market was divided largely by only three main networks (Armstrong, 2016). Still, the phenomenon of the miniseries’ popularity should not be underestimated: “Across the country, theaters and restaurants lost business as customers stayed home to watch the serialization. Hostesses arranged party plans so that guests could watch installments. Bartenders kept their patrons from leaving only by switching their TV sets from hockey and basketball games to Roots” (Marmon, 1977).

It might be argued that the decade of the 1970s was actually a suitable period for the series to attract widespread interest. With the social and racial issues, previously swept under the rug until the mid-1950s, very visible in media discourse, militant organizations such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party active in public life, and the whole nation focused on the bicentennial year of 1976, the darkest pages of the American history had been for the first time put in the spotlight. Even the heavens seemed to favor the miniseries: “An extended cold weather snap throughout the East and Midwest forced many people to remain home, so television viewing was slightly higher than usual” (Castleman, Podrazik, 2016, p. 266).

Critical reception of the show has also been predominantly positive. “Roots” was showered with industry awards, including nine Primetime Emmy Awards, a Golden Globe, and a Peabody Award. While the praise was far from unanimous (*Time* magazine’s film critic Richard Schickel hit out at “Roots” for allegedly offering “almost no new insights, factual or emotional, about the most terrible days of the black experience” and serving viewers “a handy compendium of stale melodramatic conventions”) (Schickel, 1977), reviewers generally appreciated the production for its “raw, visceral impact” (Marmon, 1977) and successful execution of TV’s staple strategies. For television historians Harry Castleman and Walter J. Podrazik, “Above all, *Roots* attracted and kept its audience because it contained the basics of entertaining television: excellent writing, first rate acting, effective violence, strong relationship, tantalizing sex, a clear-cut conflict between good and evil, and an upbeat ending. Although race was its central theme, in structure *Roots* was actually more like a Western in the tradition of *Bonanza* and *Wagon Train* only with blacks as the heroes and whites as the villains” (Castleman, Podrazik, 2016, s. 266). Journalist Sander Vanocur was also enthusiastic in his review for *The Washington Post*: “We are not seeking historical exactitude, but what this television adaptation provides: a dramatic sense of what the institution of slavery did to one family that endured and survived it [...] We are watching more than a drama. We are witnessing an experience” (Vanocur, 1977, E1).

At the same time, the series attracted interest – and very different reactions – from the political circles as well: Parren Mitchell, then a Maryland Representative and the head of the Congressional Black Caucus, reportedly too disturbed by

the show’s content to finish watching it, was quoted saying “I couldn’t watch the rest. I was too angry. If I had met any of my white friends, I would have lashed out at them from a vortex of primeval anger” (Marmon, 1977), while Ronald Reagan (soon to become the 40th U.S. President) felt that “the bias of all the good people being one color and all the bad people being another was rather destructive” (Butler, 2016).

The controversial content of the show and a feeling of participating in a major cultural event led many to wonder about the show’s impact on the United States society.⁶ In his 1977 *Time* magazine piece, William Marmon quotes “a well-to-do white woman in Atlanta” fearing: “I thought *Roots* was awful. The blacks were just getting settled down, and this will make them angry again” (Marmon, 1977). Whether or not this personal testimony was authentic, the anxiety was no doubt very real and some cases of racial animosities being heated up because of “*Roots*” had been reported. The predominant view on the long-term impact of the show had been, however, optimistic; Alex Haley’s miniseries was described by many commentators as a cathartic occurrence for the nation, catalyzing effects of more understanding and empathy in the U.S. racial relations. For civil rights activist and historian Roger Wilkins, “the program’s importance was comparable to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Selma-to-Montgomery March of 1965” due to its “upending centuries of racial stereotypes” (Maranzani, 2016), while Columbia University sociologist Francis Ianni felt that “The civil rights movement seemed to be stopping for a breather. This may be a significant turning point” (Marmon, 1977).

Still, some meta-analyses suggest that that the show’s impact has been exaggerated. Researcher W. Phillips Davison, in his seminal *The Third-Person Effect in Communication* paper, claims that people think that media messages have a greater impact on others rather than themselves. As an example for this, he used the case of “*Roots*”: “Even before all episodes in the series had been shown, research organizations had started efforts to gauge its effects on the public. Several of these research projects were able to compare expected effects with observed effects. Most respondents predicted that the series would have substantial impact on the attitudes of both blacks and whites. The white reaction was expected to be increased tolerance and sympathy; blacks were expected to be angry and to show bitterness and hostility [...]. When asked for their own reactions, however, substantial pluralities of both blacks and whites reported that a feeling of sadness was the principal effect of watching *Roots*. Two researchers commented that, in general, the program did not have the widespread effects on racial attitudes attributed to it by observers” (Davison, 1983).

⁶ Some commentators have even likened the significance of the airing of “*Roots*” to such iconic moments in the American television history as the announcement of John F. Kennedy’s death by the CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite.

The Legacy

It might be argued that unlike many other TV shows from the past, “Roots” still holds its place in the collective minds of the American viewers. References to the series are commonplace in contemporary popular culture and the profound impact the series had on both the American society and other countries (as the miniseries has been broadcast all around the world) can be felt even today. For many African Americans, whose lineage had been abruptly cut short by the Middle Passage (Bińczycka-Gacek, 2025, pp. 65–69), the miniseries served as “prosthetic memory,” allowing them to incorporate images and motifs from “Roots” into their consciousness: “Elliot Caldwell, a seventeen-year-old black junior at a Houston high school, explained, «In history classes we don’t really read much about how slaves were treated. Through watching the series I learned how hard it was on them»” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 104). The father of American journalism, Walter Lippmann, called (already in 1922) the media-enforced stereotypes of people and places “the pictures in our heads” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 4). In case of “Roots,” the effects of those “pictures” went even beyond the grim period of slavery, giving the black community a sense of their ancestors’ life in Africa and much-needed pride in their heritage.

Alison Landsberg suggests that: “In some ways, Roots marked the turning point in blacks’ relationship to Africa [...]. The officials at American Forum for International Study noted, «Africa has become a real place in the minds of many Americans»” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 102). This led to significant consequences. West Africa became destination for pilgrimages of African American travellers, with Kunta’s alleged home village of Juffure the central point of the “Roots” tourism: “Within two months of the first Roots broadcast in January 1977, the NAACP began promoting ten-day Roots tours to five African countries for \$1.395 each” (Greenlee, 2016). This newly-found popularity of the region, while highly lucrative, caused commercialization of the West African culture and oversimplification of the Atlantic slave trade history as the powerful Kunta Kinte narrative largely replaced local historical lore and legends of the past.

It might be also argued that the series was responsible for kickstarting the U.S. genealogy industry. Barbara Maranzani of the History Channel claims that “Almost overnight, the tracing of bloodlines, once seen as the privilege of the rich, was suddenly in vogue. And Americans took advantage of many of the tools Haley had used; libraries across the country noted a significant uptick in visitors across all racial and ethnic lines and inquiries for genealogical records at the National Archives increased by a staggering 300 percent” (Maranzani, 2016). While these endeavors have often been unsuccessful as the pre-Civil War U.S. federal census did not include – in many cases – data that would allow identification of African American individuals (Marmon, 1977), the interest in reclaiming pre-slavery roots resulted in a resurgence of African names in the United States: “Kunte Kinte became more than a role model. He became, in effect, a body that could be worn,

a black identity that could be inhabited with pride instead of shame. This was particularly clear in the explosion of babies named Kunte Kinte and Kizzy: twenty babies in New York City alone were given those names in February 1977” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 103).

The postmodern, self-reflexive nature of the contemporary popular culture results in a plethora of allusions to the famous miniseries in television shows, music, and elsewhere. Starting with 1970 shows such as “Sanford & Son” and “Barney Miller,” “Roots” has been used as a staple reference in many TV programs, including “Saturday Night Live,” “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air,” and “Chappelle’s Show” (Harris, Hubbard, 2016). The second season episode of “Community” (NBC, 2009–2014), “Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking” mocks the star status of LeVar Burton, a hero to one of the show’s characters who suffers a mental breakdown during a dinner with his idol; the undeterred Burton (played by himself) happily comments: “More fish for Kunta.” “The Big Bang Theory,” a hit sitcom broadcast by CBS between 2007 and 2019, includes a storyline in which controversies over the miniseries’ content are used as a butt of a risky joke about the main character’s social awkwardness and lack of sensibility (Sheldon, one of the principal protagonists of the show, attempts to apologize to an African American woman, whom he had offended earlier in the episode, by offering her a “Roots” DVD).

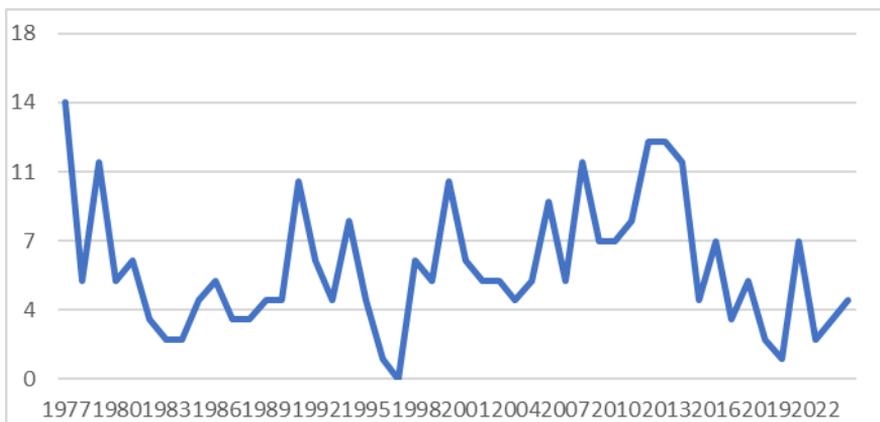


Chart 2. References to “Roots” in TV shows and movies

Source: IMDb, 2024.

Contemporary cinema has also referenced the 1977 miniseries many times, not only in movies focusing on the plight of the African American community, e.g. “Do the Right Thing” (1989) and “Boyz n the Hood” (1991), but also in films with unrelated plots, such as “The Lion King” (1994), which includes a reenactment of the iconic scene in which Kunta’s father holds up his newborn son. The scale of the

miniseries' global popularity has been reflected in allusions to "Roots" found in cinematographic productions made all around the world, e.g. the Polish crime comedy "Chłopaki nie płaczą" (2000), in which the film's villain delivers a profanity-laden, racist tirade referencing Kunta Kinte.⁷

Internet Movie Database (IMDb) lists the total of 271 references to "Roots" in television shows and movies (IMDb 2024). Detailed statistics, proving the miniseries' unfading cultural relevance, are presented in the following chart:

The lasting significance of the miniseries for the American culture might be seen as well in numerous references to "Roots" in popular music, especially in hip-hop – a musical genre deeply associated with the African American community, coincidentally developed roughly at the same time as the show, and never shying away from discussing significant real-world issues in lyrics ("rap music, notwithstanding its modern-day origins as entertainment, has always been challenged to shoulder the social responsibilities of the communities from which it emerged;") (Peterson, 2016, p. 16). It is thus little wonder that hip-hop artists such as Missy Elliot, Busta Rhymes, and Jurassic 5 all namechecked the series or its protagonist in their songs (Sisson, 2016). Kendrick Lamar's 2015 single "King Kunta" puts the character of the enslaved Mandinka warrior in the central point of its narrative, picturing Kunta Kinte as a symbol of "struggle and standing up for what you believe in. No matter how many barriers you gotta break down, no matter how many escape routes you gotta run to tell the truth" (Britton, 2015).

The success of "Roots" led to production of sequel shows: "Roots: The Next Generations" (a miniseries presenting in detail the fate of Kunta Kinte's descendants after the Civil War) and "Roots: the Gift" (an uplifting Christmas special). In 2016, a remake of the miniseries was broadcast by the History Channel; the new iteration of the show upgraded production values to match the expectations of new generations of viewers and slightly modified the storyline. Discussing the new series, BBC correspondent Jennifer Keishin Armstrong suggested that while "revivals can often spell doom for a perfectly good show's gleaming legacy," "Roots may have the best argument for a remake" as "the US is embroiled in discussion about slavery's long, dark legacy: institutionalized racism that snakes all the way up from arrest procedures to Oscar nominations" (Armstrong, 2016). While the impact of the remade series could not – obviously – be compared to the cultural maelstrom unleashed by the original 1970s show, the new version received generally positive reviews as a successful adaptation of Haley's source material for audiences living in a new era in the history of American racial relations.

⁷ "Roots" was broadcast by the Polish national TV broadcaster in September 1979, two years after its American premiere.

Conclusion

After almost half of the century, “Roots” remains a noteworthy show. Many critics, while “readily conceding that the TV series was not a precisely accurate recounting of history (few dramatizations are), nonetheless praised the production for what one of them called its mythic veracity. They had a point. For millions of Americans, Roots was real – if not necessarily literally true” (Marmon, 1977). The meaning and significance of the series lay in the stirring of the U.S. historical discourse by introducing themes and images that captured the imagination of the entire nation and allowed it to reevaluate its past, gave viewers topics for discussion and reasons to be passionate about something important.

In his famous letter to the Carnegie Commission, author E.B. White wrote that television – a medium oftentimes criticized for its shallowness and lack of courage (Kuś, 2022, pp. 142–143) – “should be providing the visual counterpart of the literary essay, should arouse our dreams, should satisfy our hunger for beauty, should take us on journeys, should enable us to participate in events, should present great dramas and music, explore the sea and the sky and the woods and the hills. It should restate and clarify the social dilemma and the political pickle. Once in a while it does, and you get a glimpse of its potential” (Carnegie Commission, 1967, p. 13). It might be argued that during those eight nights in January 1977 it really did.

References

- Allen S., Thompson R.J. (2024). “Television in the United States.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/art/television-in-the-United-States> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Armstrong J.K (2016). *Roots: The most important TV show ever?* BBC. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160602-roots-the-most-important-tv-show-ever> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Benshoff H.M. (2016). *Film and Television Analysis: An Introduction to Methods, Theories, and Approaches*. London–New York: Routledge.
- Bińczycka-Gacek E. (2025). *Multisensory Experience of the Middle Passage in Alex Haley’s “Roots.”* In: M. Banaszkiwicz, K. Nikielska-Sekuła (eds.). *Cultural Heritage and Mobility from a Multisensory Perspective* (pp. 61–73). London–New York: Routledge.
- Britton L.M. (2015). *Kendrick Lamar performs ‘King Kunta’ for the first time live*. Available at: <https://www.nme.com/news/music/kendrick-lamar-55-1209606> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Burns T. (1977). *The BBC: Private Institution and Private World*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Butler B. (2016). “Everyone was talking about ‘Roots’ in 1977 – including Ronald Reagan.” *The Washington Post*, May 30th. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/05/30/everyone-was-talking-about-roots-in-1977-including-ronald-reagan/> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Carnegie Commission (1967). *Public Television: A Program for Action*. New York: Bantam.
- Castleman H., Podrazik W.J. (2016). *Watching TV: Eight Decades of American Television* (3th ed.). Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

- Corti L., Thompson P. (2012). "The Secondary Analysis of Archived Qualitative Data." In: C. Seale, F. Gubrium, D. Silverman (eds.). *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage Publications.
- Davison W.P. (1983). "The Third-Person Effect in Communication." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47 (1), pp. 1–15.
- Delmont M.F. (2016). *Making Roots*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Edgerton G.R. (2007). *The Columbia History of American Television*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Greenlee C.R. (2016). *How 'Roots' Reverberated in Africa*. Available at: <https://prospect.org/culture/roots-reverberated-africa/> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Haley A. (1965). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove Press.
- Haley A. (1976). *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Harris A., Hubbard D. (2016). *How Pop Culture Reacted to Roots*. Available at: <https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/05/how-pop-culture-responded-to-roots-from-sanford-and-son-to-snl-to-chappelle-video.html> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- IMDb (2024). *Roots: Connections*. Available at: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0075572/movie-connections/?ref_=tttrv_sa_5 (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Kuś R. (2013). *PBS. Amerykańska telewizja publiczna*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Kuś R. (2022). "Newton N. Minow's "Vast Wasteland": Rhetoric of the end of the golden age of television." *Res Rhetorica*, 9 (2), pp. 138–151.
- Landsberg A. (2004). *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lippmann W. (1998). *Public Opinion*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Lisowska-Magdziarz M. (2006). *Analiza tekstu w dyskursie medialnym*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Maglio T. (2016). *Roots' Rewind: Here Are the 1977 Version's Mind-Blowing Ratings*. Available at: <https://www.thewrap.com/roots-1977-abc-history-tv-ratings/> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Maranzani B. (2016). "Remembering 'Roots.'" *History*. Available at: <https://www.history.com/news/remembering-roots> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Marmon W. (1977). "Why Roots Hit Home." *Time*. February 14th. Available at: <https://time.com/archive/6848570/why-roots-hit-home/> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Museum of Broadcast Communications* (2014). Available at: <https://www.museum.tv/> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Paterson R. (1998). "Drama and Entertainment." In: A. Smith (ed.). *Television: An International History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peterson J.B. (2016). *Hip-Hop Headphones: A Scholar's Critical Playlist*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Schickel R. (1977). "Middlebrow Mandingo." *Time*. January 24th. Available at: <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,945724-1,00.html> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Sisson P. (2016). *Roots: A Cultural Force That Changed the Nation*. Available at: <https://patrick-sisson.com/roots-a-cultural-force-that-changed-the-nation/> (accessed: 29.06.2024).
- Vanocur S. (1977). "Dramatic Roots of America." *The Washington Post*. January 23rd. E1.
- Wimmer R.D., Dominick J.R. (2016). *Mass Media Research: An Introduction* (10th ed.). Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Terrace V. (2021). *Encyclopedia of Television Miniseries 1936–2020*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.
- Yin R. (2003). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (3th ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.