Introduction

I began this project ten years ago. It was a time when most anyone with a bit of melanin (and some without) found themselves caught up in a rising tide of neonationalism—the era of early Spike Lee films, Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," and other such revolutionary expressive forms. It seemed that everyone wanted to be black—at least in theory, if not in practice. Just as an Afro had defined "downness" in the social parlance of the 1960s and 70s, so too did a red, black, and green Africa medallion or a "40 Acres and a Mule" T-shirt now signify racial authenticity.[1]

I was a twenty-two-year-old, self-consciously light-skinned graduate student, and I too wanted to be "really black" (as opposed to, as one dreadlocked professor referred to me, "not really black"). While at the time I never would have described my overly earnest interviews with rappers such as KRS-One and filmmakers such as John Singleton as attempts to come to terms with my own ambiguous racial positionality, they were just that.

There were two primary locations, I found, from which we spoke as black Americans. One, a space largely occupied by "boyz in the 'hood" films and rap music, was about the pain of exclusion from mainstream America; it was also about violence and masculinity. The other was about very different kinds of exclusions, different kinds of suffering. This is not to say that such realms did not overlap, of course. But the second realm was

more obvious in the world of black television production, as well as in the works of black women writers.

In the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Kristin Hunter, Audre Lorde, and Michelle Cliff, for example, creative reconfigurations of "home" worked to recuperate blackness from always meaning "heterosexual," "male," "poor," and "criminal." Sometimes, argued these authors, blackness was also about being a feminist, being light-skinned, being privileged, and/or loving women. Blackness, in other words, was also about the complex processes of acculturation and *intra*racial estrangement.

At about the same time that black women novelists were enjoying heightened interest in their work, an emergent genre of black-produced television (which I locate both during and after the success of *The Cosby Show*) also highlighted intraracial differences. In the late 1980s and early 90s, shows such as *Cosby, A Different World,* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* presented the refreshing possibility that racial authenticity could be negotiated rather than assumed—or perhaps even done away with altogether.

What emerged were contested narratives that challenged the very notion of "blackness" itself. Despite a seemingly coherent nationalist aesthetic (like kente decor, black-owned co-ops and cafés, historically black universities), these narratives were about more than a seamless Afrocentricism. Rather, they wrestled with the unspoken pleasures (and horrors) of assimilation, the shock of integration, and the pain of cultural homelessness.

Given the social and economic context of the time, it was understandable that such contradictory representations would appear. With the "success" of integration and affirmative action in the 1960s and 70s, unusually large numbers of African Americans had been granted economic mobility. More privileged than any generation before them, this "buffer" caste, although only a small fraction of the total African American population, experienced a certain, strange inclusion, one that blurred established notions of race. Unlike the 1960s and before, who "counted" as black was no longer clear by the 1980s. Nor was it clear who now

suffered enough to be a "legitimate" family member.

Successful African American producers, directors, writers, and entertainers (as well as viewers) also wrestled with these questions. Black productions of the 1990s were individual autobiographies as well as communal outpourings of group desire—collective rememberings not unlike slave narratives. During this period, black producers and consumers engaged in awkward modes of resistance and representation. It seemed that we wanted both capitalism and communalism; feminism as well as a singular, authentic self; patriarchy plus liberation; Africa the motherland *and* the American dream. These yearnings were explored, celebrated, and contested in black-produced shows of the 90s.

Because most of the productions discussed in this book aired on the Fox network (the bulk of this project having been completed prior to the debut of copycats Warner Brothers and United Paramount), I begin with a brief history of the fourth network and the structural shifts that enabled its ascent.[2]

In the 1980s middle-class white audiences began to replace standard network viewing with cable subscriptions and videocassette recorders. Since working-class African American and Latino audiences in general did not yet have access to these new technologies, they continued to rely on the "free" networks—NBC, CBS, and ABC. Consequently, "urban" audiences suddenly became a key demographic in the overall network viewership. During this period, black audiences watched 44 percent more network television than nonblacks. What's more, they clearly preferred black shows.[3]

These shifts had a profound effect on television programming. In the mid-1980s good pitches, or show ideas presented to producers, began to be defined as those appealing to both "urban" and "mainstream" audiences. NBC, in particular, boasted crossover hits such as *The Cosby Show* (the nation's number one program for five seasons), *A Different World,* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air.* In fact, NBC could even be considered something of a prototype for Fox's urban network, given that it had

always carried more "ethnic" shows than either CBS or ABC.[4] (When Fox owner Rupert Murdoch assembled his programming department, he even brought Garth Ancier, Kevin Wendle, and other former NBC employees on board.)

The new network launched in 1986. By "narrowcasting" or targeting a specific black viewership (what Pam Veasey referred to cynically as the "Nike and Doritos audience"), and "counter-programming" against other shows to suit that audience's taste, Fox was able to capture large numbers of young, urban viewers. By 1993, the fourth network was airing the largest single crop of black-produced shows in television history. And by 1995 black Americans (some 12 percent of the total U.S. population) were a striking 25 percent of Fox's market.

The Fox network was unique, then, in that it inadvertently fostered a space for black authorship in television. It did this to capitalize on an underrepresented market, of course. But the fact that entertainers such as Keenen Ivory Wayans, Charles Dutton, Martin Lawrence, and Sinbad were made executive producers of their own shows was no small feat. Such titles increased (to varying degrees) their decision-making power and enabled them to hire writers, producers, and directors who shared their visions.

After Keenan Ivory Wayans's 1988 $3 million film *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* made $20 million at the box office, the director-comedian held a private screening for Fox film executives, hoping to get financial backing and distribution for his next project. Although no film executives showed up at the screening, Fox's TV people did, offering Wayans a weekly half-hour series in which he could do "whatever he wanted." So it was that Wayans became the creator, director, executive producer, and star of *In Living Color*, an unprecedented arrangement for a black entertainer in 1990.

Fox was "completely different" from traditional networks in its early days, recalled Wayans.[5] "Barry Diller, who had been responsible for bringing Eddie Murphy to Paramount, was there. And there were a lot of other young, cutting-edge executives.

They wanted to be the rebel network." In fact, had Wayans's idea for a sketch variety show like *In Living Color* come along in the 1980s, noted Twentieth Television president Harris Katleman, it would have been considered "too ethnic." Fox aired the irreverent series when it did because it needed "an intriguing spin" to distinguish it from the more traditional networks.[6]

It was in this same spirit that Fox programmer Garth Ancier had approached the comedy writing team of Ron Leavitt and Michael Moye (who are white and black, respectively) three years earlier. "Do anything you want," said Ancier, "but make sure it's different. . . . Fox is here to give you the chance to do things you can't do anywhere else."[7] While Leavitt and Moye had written for shows like *The Jeffersons* in the past, it was extremely rare, in 1987, for a black writer to create his (and certainly never her) own series. *Married . . . with Children,* Leavitt and Moye's invention, went on to become the longest-running sitcom in network history.

We should look more closely, then, at what I see as four key elements of black-produced television. Based on over a decade of researching shows that have black casts and involve a significant degree of black creative control, I have found that four common traits reappear consistently. These can be summarized as: autobiography, meaning a tendancy toward collective and individual authorship of black experience; improvisation, the practice of inventing and ad-libbing unscripted dialogue or action; aesthetics, a certain pride in visual signifiers of blackness; and drama, a marked desire for complex characterizations and emotionally challenging subject matter. Throughout this book, I refer to these four traits as a way of recognizing and identifying common ideological trends within black productions.

In addition to these common traits, black shows may also be identified thematically, as most have a tendency to revisit issues of deep significance to in-group audiences. (By "in-group" or "in-house," I refer to audience members who are not necessarily black, but who identify with what may be described as shared "black" positionalities, experiences, memories, or desires.) This

book is organized in three sections to reflect such thematic overlappings. It is important to note that some shows which may seem crucial to this discussion—such as ABC's *Family Matters,* the longest-running black sitcom of all time—are deliberately left out. This is because such shows are more accurately categorized as mainstream programs with black casts, than as complex black productions containing the dynamic qualities described above.

Having said that, Part 1 looks at color and caste in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air, The Sinbad Show, South Central,* and *Pearl's Place to Play.* Part 2 highlights questions of gender and sexuality through readings of *Martin* and *Living Single.* Part 3 explores representations of political movement in both *Roc* and *New York Undercover.* It should be noted that these are by no means neat divisions. On the contrary, every show mentioned in this book is read *in dialogue with* the others. *New York Undercover,* as we shall see, is as concerned with issues of color, beauty, and sexuality as *Martin* and *Living Single* are with class mobility. Nevertheless, such thematic categorizations are helpful, I think, for our purposes here.

Beginning with the first trait of black television, then, we should know that to talk about autobiography, or authorship, in television is tricky, given that there can never be a single "author" of any particular show. As Tim Reid put it, there's "always somebody else you've got to answer to in network television . . . There's this guy and this guy's boss. Then that division and that division's boss. Then the network. Then the advertisers. They're like lawyers," said Reid. "They stand in front of you five and six deep, and they all have a say in the quality of what you're doing." In short, television production is a collective process, and black television in particular reveals group memories as well as individual ones.

For example, writer-producer Rob Edwards *(A Different World)* notes that he has often run "into trouble" by making in-group references while working on white shows. "I would start pitching stuff from a specifically black childhood," he recalls. "Like parents combing your hair. [But] you can't pitch a nap joke on *Full House.*"[8] Writer-producer Susan Fales *(A Different World)* agrees.

"There's a certain gift of the gab . . . a tendency to riff," she notes, "that has been a part of our survival and is absolutely more common on black-produced shows." This penchant for improvisation, says Fales, "can also lead to problems . . . like when actors refer to 'ashy skin.' You can't do that unless you're a very big hit."

Not only are black-produced scripts full of such collective autobiographical references, but these allusions also appear, as Fales indicates, in unscripted forms such as slips of the tongue, bloopers, and ad-libbed dialogue. This leads us to the second characteristic of black television: improvisation.

Historically, the improvisational practices of "cuttin' up" and "playing the dozens" have enabled black Americans to communicate with one another, often under hostile conditions. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests (borrowing from Claudia Mitchell-Kernan), the Signifying Monkey is able to signify—a rhetorical strategy of resistance characterized by "marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens"—because "the Lion does not understand the nature of the monkey's discourse. . . . The monkey speaks figuratively, in a symbolic code; the lion interprets or reads literally and suffers the consequences of his folly, which is a reversal of his status as King of the Jungle."[9] Cultural theorists have also described this private discourse as "bivocality," "in-jokes," and "minor discourse."[10] Whatever we may call it, such in-group referencing is certainly a dialogic process in black television.

During a taping of Fox's *The Show,* for example, the predominantly African American and Latino studio audience failed to respond when comedian Mystro Clark followed his script closely in a scene with white co-star Sam Seder. In scenes with other black actors however, Clark spontaneously broke into improvisation, which the audience loved. From that point on, network executives routinely instructed black performers on the series to "play the dozens" during tapings.

Autobiography and collective memory are also revealed

"extratextually," or outside a given narrative. While I have discussed briefly how autobiography and collective memory appear in the narratives of TV show scripts and unscripted dialogue, David Marc argues that television personalities relate to audiences in three ways: through a "frankly fictional" character; through a "presentational" character, in which the actor appears as her- or himself within a theatrical space such as a commercial; and through a "documentary" persona, in which the actor's real-life activities, opinions, and lifestyle are revealed through outside media.[11] Viewers register presentational and documentary associations linked to an actor as well as the fictional character he or she plays. (One may think of how this assemblage works in the case of someone like Bill Cosby, whose fictional Cliff Huxtable of *The Cosby Show* combines with the presentational image of the wholesome spokesperson for Jell-O pudding and the documentary persona of the real-life family man and philanthropist found in Cosby's autobiographical best-seller *Fatherhood.*)[12] Often, it is by examining fictional, presentational, and documentary personas together that we begin to recognize the most dynamic and intriguing patterns in our own reception practices.

The third characteristic of black television is culturally specific aesthetics. While rap music and graffiti-like graphics were common on white shows of this era as well, Afrocentric clothing, hair styles, and artifacts performed specific functions in black shows. Frequent references to Malcolm X in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air, Martin,* and *Roc,* for instance, in the form of posters, photographs, and T-shirts, invoked romanticized spaces of mythical unity and nationalist desire.[13]

Characters on *A Different World* displayed images of Yannick Noah, a world-renowned black French tennis player, and Angela Davis on their dormitory walls. Sportswear carrying the names of black colleges such as Howard and Spelman were common sights on *The Cosby Show, A Different World, Roc, The Sinbad Show,* and *Living Single,* as were black-owned publications like *Emerge, Ebony,* and *Essence.* The paintings of Varnette Honeywood fea-

tured in the Huxtable home even led some viewers and producers to invest in her work.[14]

Like the 1960s' *The Bill Cosby Show,* which included frequent references to H. Rap Brown, dashikis, and soul food, such aesthetic markings did more than construct imagined community: They proposed a politics.[15] In his highly successful sitcom of the 1980s, Cosby even went to battle with NBC (and won) over an "Abolish Apartheid" sticker on Theo Huxtable's bedroom door.[16]

The fourth trait of black television is the struggle for drama. Whereas traditional sitcom formats demanded a "joke per page," many black productions of the 1980s and 90s resisted such norms by consciously and unconsciously crafting dramatic episodes. With less explicit story lines, unresolved endings, and increasingly complex characters, these "dramedies" allowed for exploration of painful in-group memories and experiences.[17]

While dramedies were often praised on white sitcoms (for example, in *Home Improvement*'s treatment of leukemia), such moves on black shows were rarely welcomed by networks, as was made clear with the cancellation of *Frank's Place,* a hard-hitting dramedy that looked at intraracial class and color differences among other issues. "There have been sparks of renewed hope in television," noted Tim Reid, who starred in and produced the show. "[But] the attempt to redefine the black sitcom formula is still a goal."[18]

Another example of network resistance to black drama was NBC's premature cancellation of *A Different World.* In its first season, the show was set in "a black college with a lot of white faces," said former staff writer Calvin Brown Jr. (Viewers may recall Marisa Tomei's early appearances.) "Although they had Thad Mumford and Susan Fales," said Brown, "the first season was not black-produced." That changed by season three, however, when Bill Cosby hired director-producer Debbie Allen to revamp the series.

Because Allen encouraged her largely African American staff to explore serious issues, the sitcom began to evolve around

dramatic story lines: a woman physically abused by her boyfriend, a student with AIDS, white racism toward black shoppers in a posh jewelry store. One episode even addressed intraracial color prejudice and the fact that some light-skinned southerners had owned slaves. As Susan Fales recalled, this was a particularly explosive episode. "Discussion went on for three hours after that first table reading," said Fales. "The actors and writers had such painful memories . . . and we got so many calls and letters. People connected with the show on a very profound level."

"Debbie Allen came on and saved us," recalled former cast member Sinbad, as the show became, in the words of J. Fred MacDonald, "a vehicle for exploring social problems as disparate as date rape and the high percentage of blacks in the U.S. military."[19] But while *A Different World* remained among the top five of all shows according to Nielsen (and even, at one point, outranked *Cosby* among black viewers in particular), the series was oddly canceled in 1991.

"Advertisers started requesting scripts of the show beforehand," recalled Debbie Allen. "This was new. But I had been given orders by Bill Cosby himself to go in and clean house, and to make it a show about intelligent young black people." Indeed, Allen had been given a rare opportunity; one that would not come again anytime soon. Although Allen continued to direct sitcoms such as *The Sinbad Show,* and later starred in NBC's *In the House,* she recognized that even black productions (such as the latter, created by Winifred Hervey Stallworth and produced by Quincy Jones) were not necessarily going to be "issue-oriented." "Like the buffoons in Shakespeare," concluded Susan Fales, "we were not regarded as interesting enough for drama."

Three years later the Fox network also canceled *The Sinbad Show, Roc, South Central* and *In Living Color*—four of its six black productions—in one fell swoop. Reverend Jesse Jackson initiated boycott threats and letter-writing campaigns; Ralph Farquhar and Tina Lifford (producer and star of *South Central,* respectively) traveled to Washington, D.C., to enlist the support of

the Congressional Black Caucus; and Representative Ed Towns (D-NY) lambasted what he called the network's "plantation programming." "Fox-TV created its niche based upon racy, black, and youth-oriented programming," said a press release from the congressman's office. "Apparently, as the network moves to become more mainstream, its attitude to positive black programs is, we don't need, nor want them anymore. . . . I can assure you, the CBC [Congressional Black Caucus] and the black community is not going to allow [Rupert Murdoch] to blatantly treat us with disrespect and apparent contempt."

And yet it did. Fox cited poor ratings in canceling the shows, but it wasn't black faces or producers that did the programs in: It was black *complexity.* After Murdoch spent $1.6 billion on the rights to the National Football League's Sunday games, the network began to seek white "legitimacy." As Calvin Brown Jr. explained, only black folks and teenagers were watching Fox in its early days, "so they could get away with a little more. But now with football, baseball, and hockey, that's over. We won't ever have another space in network television like that again."[20]

The spaces "won" for difference in popular culture are carefully policed and regulated, writes cultural theorist Stuart Hall. True, but stay tuned. What happened in black television in the early 90s went beyond the policeable.

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