The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television

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THE FOX NETWORK AND THE REVOLUTION IN BLACK TELEVISION

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. . .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. . . .

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

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television than nonblacks. What's more, they clearly preferred black shows.[1]

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.[2] (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 Keenen 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.[3] "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.[4]

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."[5] 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 tendency 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. . . .

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*."[6] 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. . . . Cultural theorists have also described this private discourse as "bivocality," "in-jokes," and "minor discourse."[7] 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.[8] 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*.)[9] 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, hairstyles, 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.[10]

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 featured in the Huxtable home even led some viewers and producers to invest in her work.[11]

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.[12] 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.[13]

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.[14]

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."[15]

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."[16] 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. . . .

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."[17] . . .

"Did you ask Keenen," inquired director Bill Duke when I interviewed him in his Pacific Palisades home, "who has the rights to all those *In Living Color* reruns in Asia, and all over the world?" It was a good question, one I had not asked. Which brings us to the problem of media ownership.

In 1997, the Reverend Jesse Jackson was again on the heels of the media monsters, noting in his keynote address to the National Association of Minorities in Communication that minority media ownership had fallen by 15 percent over the past year alone.[18] At this rate, continued Jackson, there might be no remaining minority-owned stations by the year 2004. Without delving too far into the legalese of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), I think it worthwhile to highlight some key events in recent telecommunications history—events that slipped past us while we debated the pros and cons of "positive" versus "negative" imagery.

Twenty years ago, President Nixon initiated a tax certification policy to help minority entrepreneurs buy fairer shares of the broadcast media pie. The incentive allowed for station owners and cable system operators to defer taxes on capital gains should they sell to minority buyers. As a result of the initiative, more than three hundred broadcast properties were sold to minorities over the next seventeen years, raising the percentage of minority ownership from 0.5 percent to a far grander 3 percent.

In 1995, however, something strange happened: An "especially slick" congressional bill generated "almost overnight" by Texas Republican Bill Archer called for an end to the tax incentive.[19] To ensure the bill's speedy passage, it was tucked inside an initiative to provide significant health care deductions for self-employed taxpayers—legislation that Republicans knew President Clinton wanted to see passed.

Why the sudden urge to end such a long-standing provision (barring the simple possibility of anti-civil rights backlash, of course)? The answer had everything to do with Rupert Murdoch, who sought to destroy a pending deal between his competitor, Viacom, and minority investor Frank Washington. The cancellation of the tax incentive did just that.[20] (Fox, on the other hand, managed to squeeze through its own minority investment deal: the $150 million sale of an Atlanta station to Qwest, a minority-controlled venture founded by Quincy Jones, Don Cornelius, Geraldo Rivera, and former pro football star Willie Davis.)

The irony in these events is that throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Rupert Murdoch not only found ways to profit from the cultural production and consumption practices of African Americans, but he also manipulated, to the collective detriment of black people, governmental infrastructures designed to balance the racially distorted playing field of media ownership. When such infrastructures threatened to limit Murdoch's monopolistic domination, in other words, he simply had them removed.

In 1994, for example, Fox took advantage of tax breaks for minority-owned enterprises by sinking $20 million into Blackstar Communications so that the minority venture could expand from three to fourteen stations (of which Fox would own a 20 percent interest). No act of goodwill, this was a move designed to circumvent FCC ownership limits. At the time, broadcast groups were limited to owning no more than twelve stations, covering no more than 25 percent of the nation's homes. In contrast, the limit for minority-controlled groups was fourteen stations and 30 percent coverage. Perhaps Jason Elkins, CEO of New Vision Television, put it most succinctly: "Those of us in broadcasting would [all] like to own twenty stations. It may be that Fox has found a way to do it through minority ownership."[21]

I've provided these brief musings on ownership so that we might keep in mind the larger contexts of global capitalism, even as we interrogate specific shows. In an environment in which government and market forces are actively hostile to nonwhite media ownership, the possibilities for black authorship are tentative at best. In fact, any potential for intraracial dialogue and collective autobiography in television is clearly mediated, sporadic, and forever subject to market-driven goals.[22]

Having said this, I'd like to close with a look at the changing landscape of black programming since 1994—the year that Fox canceled four of its six black shows. In 1993, Rupert Murdoch purchased the broadcast rights to Sunday afternoon football for $1.58 billion. This was followed by a $500 million deal with New World Communications that allowed Fox to expand from six to twenty-two stations, and to reach some 40 percent of U.S. households by 1997. Both transactions signaled the dawning of a new era for the fourth network, which was no longer content with its own "ghettoization" (or what was referred to in kinder days as "narrowcasting"). Because the fourth network now set out to be a legitimate contender alongside ABC, CBS, and NBC, it needed more white viewers.[23]

But the programming designed to entice Fox's newfound white male audience—shows such as *Fortune Hunter, Hardball*, and *Wild Oats*—was a dismal failure with the imagined beer-guzzling sports audience. Sunday's post-NFL schedule was gutted twice before Fox executives decided to backtrack, adding more of *The Simpsons* to its Sunday lineup, plus new episodes of the Latino-oriented *House of Buggin'*, starring John Leguizamo.

But then came a surprise. Both Warner Brothers (WB) and United Paramount (UPN) launched the "fifth" and "sixth" networks in 1996, consciously replicating Fox's early strategies in order to cash in on what now appeared to be an abandoned market. As Fox's president of sales noted, "[The new networks] are trying to outfox Fox, using our success in going for the young [black] audience."[24]

Just as Fox employees were once recruited from the then blackest network, NBC, new WB employees were snatched up from Fox. Suzanne Daniels, who helped to develop *Living Single*, became head of prime-time development at WB; Jaime Kellner became chief executive; Garth Ancier was again programming chief; and Bob Bibb and Louis Goldstein, who promoted Fox during its first two years, became marketing heads. "We are basically targeting the same old Fox demos," noted Bibb and Goldstein. "We want to convey the same attitude of hip."[25]

For their respective 1996-97 seasons, both WB and UPN aired a string of black-cast comedies. On WB, these included: *The Wayans Brothers*, *The Parent 'Hood* (starring *Hollywood Shuffle* director Robert Townsend), *The Jamie Foxx Show,* and *Lush Life*, a pilot from Yvette Lee Bowser, which was quickly canceled. In addition, WB picked up both *The Steve Harvey Show* and *Sister, Sister* following their cancellations on ABC.

Encouraged by the success of its *Moesha*, UPN also immersed itself in programming starring African Americans and Latinos. Among its new pilots were *Working Guy*, a sitcom about a black veteran adjusting to life on Wall Street; *American Family*, which tracked the goings on of an upwardly mobile Latino family; *Goode Behavior*, starring Sherman Helmsley as a con-artist father who moves in with his university dean son; *Sparks*, with Robin Givens; *Malcolm and Eddie*; and *Homeboys From Outer Space*. UPN also picked up the L. L. Cool J vehicle, *In the House,* following its cancellation on NBC.

Although it could be argued that black stars and producers also exercised significant creative control on each of these shows, the later productions never explored intraracial issues with the same seriousness of purpose as earlier shows discussed above. In contrast, African American decision makers such as Townsend, Shawn and Marlon Wayans, Jamie Foxx, Steve Harvey, and Suzanne de Passe almost never ventured beyond standard sitcom formats and mainstream, aracial themes. It is important to understand then, that while there were some twenty-one shows with black lead characters in 1997 (as compared to eight in 1990), these new series carefully avoided in-group dialogue around issues of color, class, gender, and sexuality. Network executives, it seems, now realized that they could have black-looking shows without the hassle of black complexity.

In fact, when ABC canceled its "black" lineup in 1995—shows like *On Our Own, Me and the Boys*, and *Sister, Sister*—*Los Angeles Times* television writer Rick DuBrow asked an important question: Why were these cancellations any different from Fox's axing of African American shows two years earlier? Why was there no protest over the cancellation of such "positive" black comedies? I would argue that black viewers did not complain—or even notice—because we had never invested the same degree of hope in these productions. These were black-*cast* shows as opposed to black *productions*. The shows that black audiences have been most passionate about, historically, are those presenting African American characters as multilayered, historical subjects who are ever-conscious of the collective.[26] . . .

While viewers aren't likely to see the Fox of the early 1990s again, racial narrowcasting remains an essential strategy for broadcast outlets such as Fox, WB, and UPN, as well as for cable stations such as Black Entertainment Television (BET), which purchased the rights to *Roc* and *Frank's Place* following their respective cancellations on network TV.[27] The growing Latino audience has also inspired Spanish-language premium services such as GEMS Television (the equivalent of Lifetime for Latinas), HBO en Espanol, and the Fox Latin American Network.

In short, the wave of the future for in-house, culturally specific dialogue will not necessarily be in network television. More and more, it will probably be found in cable or online services. As *Entertainment*

Weekly speculated, "The bigger UPN and the WB get, the whiter they'll become."[28] Whatever possibilities the new technologies may present, authorship will continue to be mediated by increasingly consolidated, transnational media conglomerates. . . .

I'm not particularly optimistic about the future of African American cultural representation. As Wayans reminded me, "Fox changed the course of black television *unintentionally*. They didn't go out to make black shows. They went out to make alternative programming. And when I came along with *In Living Color*, they were actually very fearful of what I was doing. But they knew that it was something different. And that's what they have to get credit for. By allowing that voice to be expressed, they discovered a whole new audience." Like an unfaithful lover, Fox continues to need black viewers—but on its own terms.

"The only reason Fox, WB, and UPN get involved in black programming," added a network vice president who did not wish to be named, "is so that they can temporarily sustain themselves. The minute they can, they pull out. The last thing these executives want to do is go to parties and talk about *Sparks, Sparks*, and more *Sparks*. It's something they want nothing to do with." "They build themselves up with black audiences," agreed former *New York Undercover* producer Judith McCreary. "Then once they're established, they dump us."

This [chapter] bears witness to the internal contradictions of African American producers and consumers. While our collective yearning for the mythical American dream is apparent in virtually every episode of every black-produced show, black Americans are stepping into a new century largely removed from the benefits of a global capitalist economy. Our challenge remains one of critical engagement. Because visual media colonize our imaginations, we must continue to strive for vigilant and sophisticated readings of television culture. We must continue to create transformative psychic—and physical—spaces in which to live fuller, more just lives.

Television, like the larger society it reflects, is at a crossroads. Shall we live and work and play together, or not? Integration, or niche markets? Fox, more than any other network, could provide a representational bridge to the future. Neither blatantly homeboyish like its successors, nor as Wonder Breadish as the original three networks, the fourth network has now set its sights on an "organic" multiculturalism. . . .

In the meantime, it would serve us well to remember that where integration fails, African Americans will always find ways to talk to one another, to dream and desire collectively. The Fox network of the early 1990s was one such place. Almost by accident, the fourth network nurtured dramatic episodes of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air, The Sinbad Show*, and *South Central* that addressed intraracial classism and colorism; episodes of *Martin* and *Living Single* that looked at issues of black sexuality, gender, and romance; *Roc* that asked us to define a contemporary model of social responsibility and collective action; and *New York Undercover* that wrestled with shared yearnings among African Americans and Latinos.

Like a blast of fresh air after rain, African American productions of the early 1990s allowed us to inhale just a bit deeper, to reflect a fraction of a dramatic minute longer. Such shows helped us to know that our fears, desires, and memories are often collective, not individual. We may have been watching alone in our homes, but black shows of the 1990s were not unlike those conversations our grandparents used to have on front porches, in segregated cities, so far away from home.

Notes ◆

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1. See Nielsen 1987 and Alligood.

2. See David Atkin for a summary of NBC and black programming. By the early 1990s, ABC's lineup also included black-cast comedies such as *Family Matters, Hangin' With*

Mr. Cooper, and *Sister, Sister*. However, these were not black productions in that they were not headed by majority-black production staffs.

3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from interviews with the author.

4. Feinberg, 3.

5. Block, 275.

6. Harris, 39.

7. See John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado, Norma Schulman, Tricia Rose. Schulman borrows Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a "minor discourse" to talk specifically about black sitcoms. I find her reading problematic, however, as it categorically labels *Roc*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *South Central*, and *The Sinbad Show* "assimilationist" narratives. My overriding point . . . is that such shows reveal, more accurately, a desire for that which is both African and American.

8. Also see Alperstein, who describes "imaginary social relationships" between viewers and actors based on gossip and prior media exposure.

9. Also see Gray 1989.

10. As Fredric Jameson makes clear in his classic study *The Political Unconscious*: "[Art] constitutes a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm. . . . From this perspective, ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is . . . to be seen as an ideological act in its own right" (70).

11. From a phone conversation with Eric Hanks, owner of M. Hanks Art Gallery and brother to Camille Cosby. Further extratextual ties may be seen in Bill Cosby's best-selling children's book, *Money Troubles*, which contains illustrations by Varnette Honeywood.

12. This description of *The Bill Cosby Show* is J. Fred MacDonald's, 1990, 118.

13. I thank Reebee Garofolo for alerting me to this point.

14. This is largely Ella Taylor's definition of a dramedy, 154.

15. Reid, 5. In fact Reid went on to create and co-executive produce, together with Susan Fales, yet another dramedy in 1998 called *Linc's*. Debuting to rave reviews on Showtime, the series (directed by Debbie Allen) again addressed intraracial class issues as well as what Reid called "black homophobia." And yet having an executive producer credit does not always guarantee creative freedom, as Reid reminded me in 1994. "I had control on *Snoops*," he noted. "I had a certain amount of shared control on *Frank's Place*. Anything you see my name on, I'm gonna exercise control. However, in doing so you can antagonize the system. You can cause yourself to be in contention with the structure of network television that can create an atmosphere in which you don't get the proper enthusiasm for your project, especially if you're African American."

16. MacDonald 1990, 286.

17. A word on the ratings excuse: Warner Brothers (parent company of HBO/HIP) research confirms that *Roc*'s average ratings for 1991-92 were 13-14, about right for Fox. In 1993, the show was moved from Sunday to Thursday, and ratings predictably dropped. *Martin*, meanwhile, was placed in *Roc*'s former Sunday slot, where it garnered an average of 14. As these figures suggest, *Roc*'s ratings were less an indication of audience rejection than of network scheduling practices. In fact, black audiences preferred *Roc* (number 2) to *Martin* (number 4). The problem was that Fox was now interested in white audiences, which preferred *Martin*. See also Zook, "Dismantling *M.A.N.T.I.S.*," for a description of how one show was rewritten to reflect the network's shift from an Afrocentric aesthetic to one more suitable for white audiences.

18. Hettrick.

19. Holsendolph 1995.

20. President Clinton, meanwhile, expressed regret that he had not been better able to "deal with the Murdoch situation" as he might have done had he possessed the power of line-item veto.

21. Stern. Murdoch has also avoided paying his fair share of taxes. Whereas most large corporations—be they American, British, or Australian—pay between 20 percent and 40 percent of their taxable income, Murdoch's global empire paid less than 7 percent in 1995, by

using a system of "intra-company loans." Cowe.

22. Even a powerhouse such as Quincy Jones—who shares control of Quincy Jones-David Salzman Entertainment (QDE), Qwest Broadcasting, and *Vibe* magazine with Time Warner, Warner, and Time Ventures, respectively—does not participate in a single venture in which black ownership exceeds 50 percent. Another case in point is that of Black Entertainment Television (BET). Although commonly perceived as black-owned, due to its highly visible African American shareholder Robert Johnson, the subscription service was founded with Johnson's borrowed $15,000 and $500,000 invested by John Malone's TCI. See Trescott, *Emerge* 1995: 66.

23. As former president of network distribution for Fox Broadcasting, Preston Padden noted, "The NFL . . . marked the point in time when Rupert Murdoch decided he was not content to be the fourth network. He wanted to be number one." See Don West, 18.

24. Cerone, January 2, 1995.

25. Tobenkin.

26. 1994 NBC dramas such as *The Cosby Mysteries* and *Sweet Justice* were equally disappointing. Although they starred Bill Cosby and Cicely Tyson as "positive" professionals (a detective and an attorney, respectively), these shows were essentially white productions that situated African American viewers in uncomplicated, non-race specific ways.

27. Other possibilities for black authorship and collective autobiography might resemble ventures such as the African Heritage Network, a minority syndicator owned by Frank Mercado-Valdes and Baruch Entertainment. A similar enterprise was the now-defunct World African Network headed by Phyllis and Eugene Jackson, with backing from Clarence Avant, Percy Sutton, and Sidney Small. Although this premium channel "dedicated to the cultural uplift of African descendants" never materialized, it was a fascinating study in self-representation. Its founders planned to use what they called an "Africanity index" to rate the "cultural correctness" of its programming.

28. Jacobs, 15.

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[EDITORS' NOTE: See *Color by Fox*, pp. 137ff, for a full list of personal interviews and television programs.]