

# UC Berkeley

## UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

B(I)ack Like It Never Left: Race, Resonance, and Reruns

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/05h7g6st>

### Author

Johnson, Patrick

### Publication Date

2018

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

B(l)ack Like It Never Left: Race, Resonance, and Reruns

By

Patrick R. Johnson

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Zeus Leonardo, Chair

Professor Abigail De Kosnik

Professor Derek Van Rheenen

Fall 2018



## Abstract

### B(l)ack Like It Never Left: Race, Resonance, and Reruns

by Patrick R. Johnson

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Zeus Leonardo, Chair

This audience research study explores how 1990s Black sitcoms such as *Martin*, *A Different World*, *Living Single*, *Moesha*, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* serve as a form of heritage for Black millennials. To better understand this phenomenon, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews and focus groups with 26 Black undergraduate students at a large, public, research university in the western part of the United States. In addition to interviews and focus groups, I performed textual analyses of sitcom episodes as well as the various popular texts produced in response to the shows. My analysis reveals how Black millennials sample ideas about race, gender, and class from 1990s Black sitcoms as well as how they critique the continued circulation of the texts in Black popular culture. Identifying social mobility as a central theme in most 1990s Black sitcoms, participants used the shows to help shape their professional, social, and educational aspirations. Specifically, participants stated that the shows helped them imagine themselves as college students who would go on to pursue careers with high-earning potential, while also framing their expectations of the romantic and platonic relationships necessary to achieve upward mobility. Participants described watching reruns of 1990s Black sitcoms as a normative part of their childhood and thus imagined most Black millennials as having a knowledge of and affinity for the shows. For many participants, their 1990s Black sitcom fandom was understood as a form of familial inheritance as they credited their parents and older siblings with introducing them to the shows. Participants drew on their affinities for 1990s Black sitcoms as points of connection between them and other Black students. Despite participants finding great utility in the sitcoms, they also described vexed relationships with the programs. This was particularly true related to *Martin*, which was the most popular sitcom among participants. Participants attributed their ambivalent relationship with *Martin* to what they described as the show's penchant for affirming and advancing negative stereotypes about Black women and the show's troubling depictions of Black heterosexual romantic relationships.

## Table of Contents

• Chapter 1: Introduction	1
• Chapter 2: Literature Review	7
• Chapter 3: Methods	21
• Chapter 4: Dreamchasin' (It Was All a Dream)	34
• Chapter 5: The Black Cult Classic	49
• Chapter 6: "Like Martin with No Gina"	64
• Chapter 7: The End	81
• References:	85

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Where is Hillman College? #AskRachel  
-Twitter

Answer the question:  
Tommy from *Martin*, what was his real job more than likely?  
A. Stripper  
B. Worked at a chop shop  
C. Drug dealer  
D. Collecting unemployment  
-Black Card Revoked

“We're always talking about *Martin*. We always have memes for *Martin*, but me and my friends are never like let's watch an episode of *Martin*.”  
-Taj, 20-year-old, sophomore

During the summer of 2015, at the height of the scandal surrounding former Spokane, Washington NAACP leader Rachel Dolezal's racial identity, the sardonic hashtag #AskRachel emerged. Black Twitter used the hashtag to roast Dolezal, posing questions that, if she were to answer correctly, would presumably validate her claims to Blackness. In late 2015, Cards For All People released *Black Card Revoked*, a table-top card game in the vein of the wildly popular *Cards Against Humanity* series. Like #AskRachel, the game tests players' knowledge of Black popular culture and history. Both the game and the hashtag gesture to Black cultural practices. While Black Twitter asked Rachel, “Which Kool-Aid flavor is most beloved by Black families?,” Black Card Revoked players ponder “What room were you not allowed in at Grandma's?” Many of the questions in the game and the hashtag relate to activities that occur in Black domestic spaces; with a particular emphasis on watching television produced in the 1990s. *Black Card Revoked* players may be stumped when trying to answer the following questions: “Jerome from *Martin* is a ‘playa’ from...?,” “How many fights did the *Fresh Prince* get into before his mom got scared?,” and “Best television sitcom of all-time?”. On the other hand, Dolezal presumably scratches her head when trying to locate *A Different World*'s Hillman College or determine Tommy Strawn's occupation on *Martin*.

The questions on *Black Card Revoked* and in the #AskRachel memes point to how 1990s Black sitcoms function as a form of heritage, “an ever-changing body of series, genres, stars, sights and sounds, which culturally anchor the past few decades in contemporary public memory” (Kompore, 2000, p. 20). While reruns are one of the primary means through which the Black television heritage is activated, as *Black Card Revoked* and #AskRachel evince, it is maintained through a variety of sites including fashion and music, and in the case of the aforementioned—games and memes.

Pointing to the proliferation of film adaptations of classic television series, commemorative box sets, reunion tours, and retrospective television programming, Reynolds (2011) argues that we are in the age of retro, which he describes as “a self-conscious fetish for period stylization (in music, clothes, design) expressed creatively through pastiche and citation”

(p. xii). Exploring the myriad ways that contemporary popular culture draws from the not-so-distant past, Reynolds contends that:

Not only has there never before been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past, but there has never before been a society that is able to access the immediate past so easily and so copiously. (p. xxi)

For some Black millennials, the widespread availability of these cultural artifacts results in what Reynolds (1993) describes as a “strange kind of nostalgia,” marked by “a yearning for a golden age that one never personally experienced” (p. H38). As Ndukwe (2018) contends,

Nostalgia for the '90s entails remembering a time that seemed simpler: no social media, cool style, awesome music and amazing television that made us laugh. Nowadays, it's hard to walk down the street without seeing a hip millennial dressed in styles from their local vintage shop that mimic that of a 1995 sitcom character. (para. 1)

This project explores how 1990s Black sitcoms such as *Martin*, *A Different World*, *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* have not only enjoyed a second life through syndication and cable television, but have functioned as a form of heritage for Black millennials who did not receive the media texts during their original network television run. This study looks to answer several questions.

- How are Black millennials who did not experience the texts within their original temporal context, make meaning from 1990s Black sitcoms?
- How is fandom for shows transferred from one generation to the next?

As Derrida (2002) posits, “Inheritance implies decision, responsibility, response and, consequently, critical selection. There is always a choice, whether one likes it or not, whether it is or isn't conscious” (p. 69). As Taj's quote in the epigraph illustrates, heritage is not chosen and can often seem ubiquitous. However, the inheritors do assess the utility of the choices available to them. Ultimately, this project is concerned with how Black millennials poach ideas about race, gender, and class from 1990s Black sitcoms as well as how they critique the continued circulation of the texts in Black popular culture more broadly.

To understand this phenomenon, I interviewed Black undergraduate students at a top-tier, research university in the Western part of the United States. During the interviews, participants reflected on their reception of 1990s Black situation comedies. In hopes of observing participants engaged in collective viewing, I facilitated two focus groups. In each focus group, participants watched the pilot episode of the most popular series among participants—*Martin*. Finally, I performed close textual readings of episodes referenced by participants as well as the various tertiary texts produced in response to the programs.

Through my interviews with Black college students, I not only learned what Black sitcoms they held in high-esteem but how their fandom for 1990s Black sitcoms is configured in relation to their fandoms for music and fashion from the era. Lordi's (2013) formulation of resonance is particularly useful for thinking about Black audience reception and the relationship between Black popular culture forms. In her treatment of Black women singers in African-

American literature, Lordi opts for resonance over influence to explain the relationships between the two spheres. She notes that the former implies a “vibration between things, an elusive relationship that averts narratives of cause-and-effect” thus signaling connections “that are not causal or inevitable but are nevertheless there” (p. 6). Thus, I draw on concepts and epistemologies rooted in Black music cultures in my analysis of my participants' reception of 1990s Black sitcoms, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

### **Statement of the Problem**

While *The Cosby Show*, *Fresh Prince*, and *Living Single* have received some attention from television studies scholars, shows like *Martin* and *Moesha* have been curiously absent in sitcom scholarship. Much of this work was written during the shows' broadcast television run with little to no attention devoted to Black audiences' engagement with the series once they moved into syndication or how the shows continue to circulate residually through various medium platforms and popular culture writ-large. How television remembers its past, and thus what is available for viewers to receive, often reflects and reifies power dynamics related to issues of race, gender, sexuality, region, class and ability. As Spigel (2010) observes, media archives are preserved “according to the power dynamics and beliefs of the larger social system” and thus, “instead of finding the ‘truth’ of the past, what we find in the end is the rationale (or lack thereof) for the filing system itself” (p. 68). This rationale often reflects and maintains asymmetrical power relations concealed as common sense understandings of the world (Gramsci, 1971).

As a result, what Black millennials recall, revisit, and remix matters because the source material available to them reflects particular institutional logics. These logics establish who and what is deemed worthy of remembering. Past Black media “do more than mediate memory and identity, experience and time. They are core materials through which memory and identity, experience and time are realized. They provide a way of thinking now about then” (E. Keightley & Pickering, 2006, p. 160). As self-proclaimed “90s babies,” my participants understand their 1990s Black sitcom fandom “as a key element in their collective cultural awareness and a major contributor to their generational identity” (Bennett, 2009, p. 478). Participants deemed their fandom as a constitutive element of their identities as Black millennials.

### **Theoretical Frame**

Based on this study's evidence and findings, I propose a theoretical framework that sits at the intersection of television studies and Black sound studies. Originally used by Derrida (1993) to discuss Marx's spectral presence on western societies, the term “hauntology” was popularized in the mid-2000s when British popular culture critics Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher began applying the term to a particularly British strain of music for which spectrality was a central theme. For hauntology blogger Stephen Prince (2018), hauntology refers to “work which explores and utilises misremembered past, lost progressive futures and a conjuring of parallel worlds that are haunted by spectres of the past” (p. 11). Drawing on the musical and visual aesthetics of British media culture from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, critics identified artists on the British independent label, Ghost Box Records, as exemplars of hauntology. With many of Ghost Box's artists possessing a particular affinity for the television programs of their youth--specifically 1970s British public broadcasting programs such as the Open University—label founder and artist Julian House notes that he and his label-mates sought to “create our own world where we could play with all of these reference points” (Fisher, 2014, p. 138). The label's name



evokes an image of television as a medium that both haunts and is haunted by the past. As Fisher (2014) observes,

At one level, the Ghost Box is television itself; or a television that has disappeared, itself a ghost, a conduit to the Other Side, now only remembered by those of a certain age. No doubt there comes a point when every generation starts pining for the artefacts of its childhood. (p. 138)

As 1990s Black sitcoms have lived on through syndication, they have become staples on cable stations aimed at teen audiences such as BET and MTV2. As a result, the programs constitute the television of my participants' youth, to some degree as much as their older siblings' and parents'. This attachment to media of one's youth factors heavily in hauntology. As Reynolds (2011) observes, "The memoradelic imprint left by vintage TV on the child's impressionable grey matter is central to hauntology" (p. 339). Hauntology is also predicated on bringing to the fore those artifacts and figures that reside in the recesses of television's past, those that were either misremembered or not remembered at all through most institutional means.

Writing specifically about Ghost Box's reverence for the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, the experimental sound unit responsible for the theme songs, sound effects, and background music for BBC's programming, Fisher (2014) writes, "Ghost Box presides over a (slightly) alternative world in which Radiophonic Workshop were more important than The Beatles" (p. 141). Similarly, my study's participants inhabit a world wherein *Martin* is more important than *Seinfeld*, an idea reinforced in various spheres of Black popular culture and that I explore in greater depth in chapter five. Their alternative world functions as a counter-space through which their knowledge about Black popular culture is valued, even if its denigrated in broader society. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate in chapter five, the shared knowledge of and affinity for series and characters that have been marginalized in mainstream accounts of television's history, serves as a precondition for 1990s Black sitcoms being socially constructed as cult classics.

My use of hauntology is in line with Prince's (2018) call for "using the spirit of hauntology as a starting point rather than seeing its codified elements and references as unwavering guidelines" (p. 31). Hauntology becomes a valuable starting point through which to understand the residual circulation of 1990s Black sitcoms and how this residue calcifies as heritage. Recognizing the uniquely British origins and applications of the term, Reynolds (2011) asks

Does this mean that every country, and each successive generation within their nationality, will produce its own version of hauntology—a self-conscious, emotionally ambivalent form of nostalgia that sets in play the ghosts of childhood?...What would a properly American equivalent of hauntology look like? (p. 343)

This study considers what hauntology looks like in a predominantly American context, specifically as it relates to Black audiences' relationship with television from the 1990s. For participants, the continued circulation of the programs evokes "the whole web of life and community that surrounded [them]" (Reynolds, 2011, p. 353). For Reynolds, hip-hop is hauntology's American cousin because of "its use of similar techniques--sampling, audio loops, crate digging--alongside the referencing of more indigenous cultural traditions" (Venezia, 2013, para. 3). While there are some aesthetic and technical similarities between hauntology and hip-

hop, television's influence is generally understood as much more pronounced in hauntology and has been undertheorized in Black popular music more broadly.

Through the sitcoms, and the various ways that they cite and are continually cited in Black popular culture, participants constitute what Berlant (2009) might describe as an intimate public. Participants' 1990s Black sitcom fandom is predicated on the *feeling* that "it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions" (Berlant, 2009, p. 5). As evident in *Black Card Revoked* and the #askrachel memes, Black millennials understand their attachment to 1990s Black sitcoms as contributing to a shared Black cultural knowledge.

Hauntology offers a way of thinking about television's precarious relationship with time, and how audience's reception of vintage television requires "crossing disparate and multiple historical moments to explore ways that the past, present and future occur and recur out of sequence in a complex crosshatch not only of reference but of affective assemblage and investment" (Schneider, 2011, p. 35). Television can be understood as adhering to colored people's time (aka CPT), which Iton (2008) posits demands that "we read time as more of a suggestion rather than an impenetrable, unalterable regime" (p. 123). Thus, television reception read through Black music cultures, directs us to consider how television "crumple[s] chronology like an empty bag of crisps" (Eshun, 1998, p. -004). The presence of various pasts lurks in the background of any moment of television reception.

Parham's (2009) observations about haunting in African-American literature are particularly productive for thinking about how Black television audiences experience multiple temporalities through the medium. Parham (2009) identifies haunting as

[a]ppropriate to a sense of what it means to live in between things--in between cultures, in between times, in between spaces—to live with various kinds of doubled consciousness. It speaks to...the sense that one's understanding of one's own social, political, or racial reality passes through other times, other places, and other people's experiences of the world. (p. 3)

For example, participants consistently described Black popular culture representations of Black women as being haunted by the specter of characters like *Martin's* Shenehneh Jenkins, whose failure to adhere to respectability politics looms in the background of images of Black women in reality television. As I will explore in chapter six, participants lament that *Martin's* resonance in Black popular culture contributes to the circulation of anti-Black misogyny. In this sense, the ideologies espoused in *Martin* can be understood as duppys. As Iton (2008) reminds us,

The duppy, roughly translated from Jamaican patois, refers to the specter or the ghost that emerges when one has failed to properly bury or dispose of the deceased: therefore, emancipation is haunted by slavery, independence by colonialism, and apparent civil rights victories by Jim Crow. (p. 135)

Central to hauntology is the promise of futures unfulfilled, the notion that cultural artifacts from the past gesture to an imagined future that never arrives. Vintage television can elicit a desire that the problematic ideas expressed in programs are representative of the norms of the era in which they were produced, thus any text or character complicit with oppression can be cast as "victims of their time" (Spigel, 2013, p. 271). However, hauntology challenges linear

conceptions of time, which also calls into question any thought that societies have progressed beyond certain ideas. In the next chapter, I review the literature relevant to my study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is no injunction that does not come from a certain past as future, as still to come...

But this past injunction enjoins us to respond now, to choose, select, critique

- Jacques Derrida

In the early 1990s, cable channel Nick at Nite ran a series of promotional advertisements sardonically proclaiming that they were doing the important work of preserving “our television heritage”. While tongue-in-cheek, Nick at Nite’s declaration begs the question, just whose television heritage were they preserving? Within television studies most discussions of television heritage have centered around television’s role in nation-building projects (Bociurkiw, 2011; Dhoest, 2014; Kramp, 2007; McKee, 2012; O’Sullivan, 1994; Tinici, 2009). Mapping a particularly American television heritage, Kompare (2005) describes it “as a base of legitimacy for television, a mechanism for locating television—series, genres, stars, policies, stations, logos, advertisements, or viewing experiences—in American history and memory, i.e. as something worthy of attention, preservation and tribute” (p. 102). Kompare notes that television heritage

is part of the lived, historical experience of a culture. It becomes a critical social resource, blurring the concepts of history and memory and forging national and cultural identities. It represents where we are from, and who we are, linking past and present through tangible relics and practices (pp. 105-106).

Kompare argues that post-World War II television has emerged as “the most prolific heritage generator in our culture” due to its accessibility to the masses, associations with state institutions, unlimited supply of images and sounds, and its penchant for repetition (p. 106). Building on Kompare, Gray (2008) observes that television heritage serves as “a nostalgic record of the nation, and our place in it, in which television figures prominently, so that for instance, *I love Lucy* has become as endemic of the 1950s, *Miami Vice* of the 1980s and *Beverly Hills 90210* of the 1990s as anything from outside television” (p. 41). However, the contents of this heritage and thus who is able to find themselves in it, requires assessment.

Writing about the absence of Black popular culture references in Ernest Cline’s 1980s nostalgia novel *Ready Player One*, as well as its 2018 film adaptation, Joyner (2018) questions how one is able to pine for a 1980s sans Black people:

How do you talk about the ‘80s for 372 pages (142 on-screen minutes) and not once mention Michael Jackson? A man who was ubiquitous throughout the ‘80s and 90s. Or hip-hop? 1982 was the year hip-hop took hold in pop culture. If you talk about the ‘80s and don’t mention Slick Rick, LL Cool J, De La Soul, or even The Beastie Boys then what are you even doing with your life? (para. 5)

Such erasures marginalize the cultural experiences and tastes of Black audiences, while minimizing the contributions of Black cultural producers to shaping the era’s tenor. Thus, the question remains, whose heritage is being preserved? In other words, it is clear that whiteness overdetermines many constructions of popular culture and media heritage. For Black television audiences, it may be *Amos and Andy* (1951-1953) instead of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) that is

endemic of the 1950s. And for my study's participants, shows like *Martin*, *Fresh Prince*, *Living Single*, and *Moesha* capture a 1990s that is worlds away from *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000).

Arguing for the utility of studying television heritage, Holdsworth (2008) notes "by paying attention to the ways in which past television is re-contextualized through textual, generic, personal, and institutional practices, we might begin to investigate the construction of television's *own* memory cultures and our engagement with them" (p. 140; italics in original). Mosley and Wheatley's (2008) observations about the lack of institutional commitment to preserving television aimed at women rings true when considering Black television:

Programming addressed to women, particularly those daytime magazine shows that have constituted such a significant part of the address to a female audience, has been seen as lacking in cultural value, and was therefore even less likely have been recorded and preserved than other forms or genres, such as drama and "serious" current affairs (pp. 154-155).

Whether it be daytime television aimed at women or television targeting Black audiences, understanding the content and audience experiences of marginalized groups requires charting alternative heritages. For Sexton (2012) an alternative heritage refers to

not only the sense in which these cultural actors are engaged in singling out particular, non-mainstream artifacts as worthy of interest and preservation, but also to the ways in which such activities are self-consciously positioned as alternatives to more official, mainstream heritage projects. (p. 572).

As an alternative heritage, 1990s Black sitcoms reflect what Williams describes as a residual form of culture. Williams (1973) contends that "a residual culture is usually at some distance from the effective dominant culture, but one has to recognize that, in real cultural activities, it may get incorporated into it" (p. 138). Patterson (2016) draws on Williams to understand LGBTQ engagement with *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992). Dubbing *TGC* as a residual media object, Patterson notes that the series is "residual in the sense that this television show was formed in the past but persists and is recycled and renewed with new ideas and cultural practices as it continues to circulate through culture" (Patterson, 2016, p. 2). While audiences imbue the episodes with new meanings, they must also contend with some of the old ones.

Weispfenning (2003) offers three functions for reruns, which are particularly useful for considering how reruns shape a Black television heritage. He argues that reruns inform people across generations, offer social continuity, and influence collective memory. As a form of cross-generational informing, reruns transmit values and experiences beyond the show's original temporal and spatial context. Using *Leave It To Beaver* (1957-1963) and *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) as examples, Weispfenning observes that children of baby boomers learn the values and experiences that were popularly espoused during their parents' youth. Weispfenning posits that because the content never changes reruns, reruns offer a sense of social continuity that is unavailable in other areas of life. He notes, "Jobs, living arrangements and friends all change with time, but reruns do not" (p. 172). However, this does not mean that audiences do not experience change or context while watching reruns.

For example, Denise Huxtable on *The Cosby Show* graduates high school and goes off to Hillman College on *A Different World*. In this case, the change produces a new television show.

Cast changes also occur. In another instance, one of the most notable changes occurred when Daphne Maxwell-Reid replaced Janet Hubert as Vivian Banks on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* at the beginning of season four. In changing actresses, the show also altered Aunt Viv in several significant ways. Vivian's job as a college professor was a key element of the character's identity during the first three seasons. After Maxwell-Reid's arrival the character's occupation was rarely mentioned. Furthermore, there were stark physical differences between the two actresses<sup>1</sup>. Finally, Weispenning argues that reruns inform our collective memory because they "repeat the cultural, shared experiences that have potential to define and identify generations and societies" (p. 173). However, it is important to note that television is a particularly ephemeral medium, thus its content reflects not only the technological affordances of a given time but an era's dominant ideologies as well.

As Weispenning demonstrates, television heritage serves as a cultural resource that viewers use to substantiate their understanding of generational identities. According to Fiske (1989), while television content should be understood as a commodity, as one of its primary aims is to deliver audiences to which products can be sold, audience engagement with television is predicated on their "treating it not as a completed object to be accepted passively, but as a cultural resource to be used" (p. 11). As a cultural resource, television "can be used by the consumer to construct meanings of self, of social identity and social relations" (p. 11). Jenkins (2010) notes that Fiske's conception of cultural resource "implies that mass culture needs to be reworked before it can be consumed, much as raw materials must be processed before they can be used" (p. xxvii). Citing his students' reverence for past black situation-comedies *The Cosby Show* and *Good Times* (1974-1979), Hill (2009) posits that past black media texts function as "legitimate sources of memory" for Black youth (p. 371). His students leveraged these texts in conceiving their own generational identity as morally inferior to previous generations—contrasting the *Cosby Show's* depictions of a stable two-parent family home with depictions of single black mothers in their contemporary black situation-comedies. Hill notes that his students depended on "the memories contained within media texts in constructing both the past and their conceptions of generational identity" and displayed a "frequent unwillingness to critically interrogate the source of their memories" (p. 371). Hill's work highlights the pedagogical potential of past Black television for understanding how audiences use television in crafting their various identities.

As this study is concerned with how 1990s Black sitcoms function as a form of heritage for Black students, heritage is intimately tied to issues of memory. Citing the dearth of scholarship on the use of memory in social science research, Emily Keightley (2010) evaluates memory as both a methodological tool and a theoretical construct in research. While acknowledging that memory has long existed as a formal method in oral history data collection, Keightley delineates memory studies from its more established cousin. She contends that oral histories gather respondent accounts of the past, often comparing such accounts to official history, whereas memory studies is more concerned with the process of remembering. Scholarship on memory studies is "explicitly concerned with the relationship between the past, present and future, as remembering is the activity which enables us to navigate and mediate these temporal arenas and forge links between them" (Keightley, 2010, p. 62). Memory is a complex on-going process that combines individual, cultural, and social representations, thus including some mnemonic accounts while excluding others. Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan (2007b)

---

<sup>1</sup> Or as rapper J. Cole raps on his song "No Role Modelz": "I wanna a real love/dark skin Aunt Viv love."

describe the omission process as collective occlusion. The term refers to “those stories, accounts, and narratives that while available in the memories of living individuals and archived in the documentary record, become largely blocked from view in the historical present” (p. 171). Memory studies is not concerned with historical fact as it does not necessarily “reveal how individual, social and cultural experiences in, and of the past intersect in the accounts that we give and the extent to which these demonstrate the temporal relations between past, present and future” (p. 63). As a result, Keightley argues that analyzing memory data differs from historical analysis in several key ways. Accounts are not treated as documentary evidence but rather viewed as texts. Critical interpretation of memory involves paying attention to content and form. Analysis requires looking at themes that emerge in representational accounts, while considering how metaphors and clichés are employed in ways that signal larger social and cultural meanings.

Through reruns, audiences have a portal to the past and thus are able to assess the ways the world has changed as well as how it has remained the same. Tonic (2009) contends that putting vintage television in conversation with ongoing televisual texts “offer[s] the opportunity for ideological critique of both an imaginary mono-cultural past as well as the question of televisual authority/authorship itself.” (para. 5). Interrogating the construction of television heritage requires engaging not only *what* is remembered but *who* is doing the remembering.

### **Retracing the 1990s Black Sitcom**

Throughout the history of the medium, the situation comedy has been the primary genre where Black people have been visible in scripted television, much to the chagrin of many Black cultural critics and television producers. Concerns about the overrepresentation of Black people in sitcoms stem from the knowledge that because sitcoms typically “reduce their characters to arrested adolescents, African-Americans end up being represented largely by buffoonish characters” (Brodie, 1992, p. 23). Feuer (1992) describes the sitcom as television’s “most basic program format” (p. 146). She notes that genres are defined in part by audiences, industry, and media, with the sitcom’s defining characteristics including “the half-hour format, the basis in humor, the ‘problem of the week’ that cause the hilarious situation and that will be resolved so that a new episode may take its place the next week” (p. 146). In addition to the aforementioned elements, sitcoms usually center around a single situation. Humor is generated through punchlines, slapstick comedy, and ongoing gags. The storylines typically occur in the home or in workplace environments.

While Black sitcoms share many of the characteristics of sitcoms broadly, Means Coleman (1998) argues that the Black sitcom should be understood as its own distinct genre. She writes, “What makes the Black situation comedy unique is its regular core cast of African American characters that works to illuminate the Black cultural, artistic, political and economic experiences” (p. 72). Black sitcoms often have a Black producer, director, or writer. The characters on the shows largely interact with other Black people. The characters employ Black language and verbal forms (often Black voice), and tend to focus on ‘Black issues’ such as the racism Blacks experience. Addressing the concerns that the designation of the Black sitcoms is overly reliant on the performers’ skin tone, Means Coleman writes that the Black sitcom “is ‘Black’ not only because of the featured performers, but also because its humor is based on race and is a parody of Blackness” (p. 73).

Arguing that programs such as *My Wife and Kids* (2001-2005), *The Bernie Mac Show* (2001-2006), *Family Matters* (1989-2004), *Frank’s Place* (1987-1988), and *Martin* “have little in common except that African Americans primarily comprise their casts”, Lotz (2005) questions

the Black sitcom's utility as a genre (p. 144). Focusing specifically on the network practice of programming Black sitcoms in blocks with other Black sitcoms, Lotz asserts that networks miss opportunities to highlight the programs' other characteristics by identifying the programs primarily by the race of the characters. Specifically, Lotz calls out the programming practices of netlets The WB and UPN. She writes, "By defining their comedies primarily as 'African American,' The WB and UPN reinforce the notion that skin color delimits style, aesthetics, and narrative interests, and that actors with Black skin are of no concern to White audiences" (p. 147). However, in taking Black situation comedies seriously as a distinct genre "requires us to prioritize the similarities between programs rather than their individual differences" (Fiske, 1987, p. 110).

In thinking about 1990s Black sitcoms as a distinct genre, it is important to recognize how the shows were linked discursively. As Bogle (2001) observes on many of these shows, "African American cultural references and vernacular flew all over the place" (p. 431). He continues describing how such references possibly appealed to Black audiences. He writes,

Even a comment about Puffy (Sean Puffy Combs) or Left Eye (of the singing group TLC) on an episode of *The Steve Harvey Show* was no doubt a reference that the major networks might have found (at the time) too obscure for mainstream viewers. In time, many of the cultural references were to earlier Black television programs (rather than African American social or political figures). Still, young African American audiences understood such references. Like African American viewers of the past when watching Eddie "Rochester" Anderson on *The Jack Benny Show* or Amanda Randolph on the *The Danny Thomas Show*, they responded to the rhythm and attitude of the performers; the way they used language, gestures, mannerisms—a whole assortment of cultural signs—to communicate. These were great points of identification for African American viewers. (pp. 431-432)

For Bogle, unlike previous generations of Black television performers, "the new ones too often pushed language and mannerisms to an extreme dangerously close to caricature" (p. 432). Echoing Bogle, Means Coleman (1998) dubbed the 1990s as the *neo-minstrelsy* era for Black sitcoms, arguing that many of the shows trafficked in stereotypes such as the coon, Sambo, buck, and Sapphire, thus linking Blackness to deviance. These archetypes are rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century minstrel shows and reemerged in the first Black televisual representations of the 1950s, including the "father" of the television sitcom, *Amos 'n' Andy*. For Means Coleman, neo-minstrelsy refers to "the full circle that [the] Black situation comedy has come in its treatment of Blackness, explicitly acknowledging a renewed emphasis upon the ridicule and the subordination of Black culture as homogeneously deviant" (p. 111). She observes that unlike *The Cosby Show*, the characters in neo-minstrelsy sitcoms existed in all-Black environments and as a result the shows encouraged racial segregation. According to Means Coleman, the absence of white characters in the sitcoms "may be a good thing since few individuals of any race, it would seem, would want to be part of some of the environs offered in this period" (p. 111). The following quotes about *Martin* and *Fresh Prince*, the two most popular programs among my study's participants, are emblematic of Means Coleman's assessment of 1990s Black sitcoms:



[*Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*] was the equivalent of Blacks in blackface—traditional White stereotypes of Blacks enacted by Blacks. Rather than move away from Black stereotypes, the series relied upon stereotypy and hyper-racial behaviors for its ridiculing humor (p. 116).

On *Martin*, Martin was so antagonistic to women, the series was largely misogynistic. For example, in full view of young White viewers (the series' primary audience) Martin belittled not only Black women, but cultural signifiers at times attributed to Black females (p. 123).

As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, my participants echoed similar assessments of the programs some twenty years after they were on network television. However, I would be remiss if I did not highlight how a trace of respectability politics seems to undergird the above criticisms of *Martin* and *Fresh Prince* as well as Black cultural critics' responses to Black sitcoms more broadly. This ambivalence towards the genre is generally predicated on concerns about how comedic representations of Black people potentially confirm white ideas of Blackness as deviance.

While these worries are not without some merit, they leave Black media representations, Black cultural producers, and Black audiences ensnared in a trap that is all but impossible to escape. In her work on Black women's reception of "ratchet" representations of Black women in reality television, Warner (2015) points to the limitations of "positive" Black representations, while also calling for new ways of thinking about how Black audiences work with representations, especially those that are less than respectable:

The power of the regime of representation often supersedes attempts to challenge it by simply showing good representations. The title of this essay [*They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless*] thus reflects the reality that, regardless of how positive a spin is put on representation, the work of white supremacy is always already done. Rather than continuing to have the same conversation that draws the same conclusions, we might do better by looking at the in-between space of representation to uncover a productive way of negotiating dominant characterizations. (p. 140)

Echoing Warner, Cooper (2014) addresses the animosity directed towards flawed Black female lead characters like *Scandal*'s Olivia Pope, *How to Get Away with Murder*'s Annalise Keating, and *Being Mary Jane*'s Mary Jane Paul. Their transgression—failing to embrace the respectability politics embodied in *The Cosby Show*'s matriarch Claire Huxtable. She argues that, "For too long, Black women in particular, have been saddled with the representational baggage of *The Cosby Show*" (para. 3). For Cooper, the emergence of the aforementioned characters marks the death of Clair Huxtable. However, if Huxtable is in fact dead, Cooper acknowledges that her specter looms large over how some Black viewers understand the aforementioned group of Black leading women. She writes, "These new representations of Black women labor under the old expectations" (para. 10). Pointing to the propensity for some viewers to read the characters within the frameworks of what she deems as tired stereotypes such as the mammy and the Jezebel, Cooper asks,

Maybe they simply inhabit every representation that we have been taught to fear, from the mammy to the Jezebel, to the overachieving black lady. And perhaps once we have confronted our ghosts, dealt with the things that haunt us about who we might get to be in America's popular imagination, we can ease up and let these sisters live (para. 28).

Her evocation of haunting and ghosts is particularly salient for this study as she gestures to not only how the televisual representations of Black women that followed Claire Huxtable must contend with the character but are also haunted by the analytics that have historically been applied to such images. Claire Huxtable, other Black television characters from the past, and the tropes associated with them can be understood as akin to what Fiske (1992) describes as “ghost text[s]” similar to “the ghost image on a television set with poor reception”, lurking in the background of the Black televisual representations that follow them (p. 66). Drawing on Fiske's notion of ghost texts, Gray (2006) asserts that the viewer is haunted by those texts that they have encountered elsewhere. He writes, “Resilient in refusing death, any text that we read can potentially live on forever—ageless as Bond and Batman have proven to be—to ‘haunt’ future texts. Ultimately, texts stay with us, alive in our memories” (p. 27). Despite the fraught nature of mediated Black representations, or perhaps because of it, Black audiences often find pleasure and community in imagery that is less than respectable. Thus, it is productive to consider the utility of fan studies for understanding Black audience engagement with 1990s Black sitcoms.

### **(Re)Imagining (Black) Fandom**

Explaining the need for more scholarship on Black television reception, Smith-Shomade (2012) notes, “Differences between *what* [emphasis in the original] Black viewers watch and what ‘all others’ watch has not received much critical examination beyond parenthetical variations of ‘oh yeah, *they* watch different stuff’” (p. 1; italics in original). This study is concerned not only with what television shows participants remember from the past but also the specific ways that they engage such television. Throughout this study there are times when it may seem that I am using the terms “fans” and “audiences” interchangeably. While there is some overlap between the two terms, my use of fandom intervenes in a very specific genealogy, one that has often neglected the experiences of fans of color. For participants 1990s Black sitcoms engender a fan culture “where a sense of community is generated around the reception and remediation of cultural texts” through which they navigate “extremely complex systems of belonging” (Jayemanne, 2003). Accounting for how race factors in fandom has been a vexing proposition from the field's inception during the early 1990s. As Fiske (1992) writes in one of the canonical surveys of the field,

I regret being unable to devote the attention to race which it deserves, but I have not found studies of non-white fandom. Most of the studies so far [have] undertaken class, gender, and age as the key axes of discrimination. (p. 32)

Fan studies scholarship and popular media understanding of the fan as “the weird, somewhat suspect other” is inconsistent with how Black fandom is often understood and performed among Black people (Gray, 2003, p. 67). Gray notes that fan studies often works against popular constructions of fans gendered as feminine “fundamentally, irrational, excessively, emotional, foolish, and passive” or “the unattractive, acne-suffering, 30-year-old virgin male computer nerd”

who is the "epitome of all that is not masculine" (p. 67). While there has been a recent turn in fan studies to exploring how whiteness overdetermines the field, there is still a dearth of work on how fandom functions differently for people of color (Pande, 2018; Stanfill, 2011, 2018). For Warner (2015) the lack of attention to issues of race in the field raises questions about just how committed fan studies scholars, who are overwhelmingly cisgender white men, are to including voices of fans of color. She writes,

Fandom-as-a-whole is not necessarily made up of scholars with an investment in diversity or checking their privilege or even an interest in seeing their own selves as racialized bodies in a system designed to benefit some and disadvantage Others. Thus, the gap between beginning a conversation on intersectionality and concluding with real, viable solutions is a long and weary journey many fans are not interested in taking. (pp. 36-37)

That fan studies relies so heavily on examining fan engagement with objects that are ridiculed throughout the mainstream, serves as yet another impediment to studying Black fan communities. Blackness troubles fan studies' propensity to construct fandom as chosen otherness. As Wanzo reminds us, "African Americans are always already improper subjects; part of their pleasure in a text can thus be about resisting the normativity of whiteness even as they claim their own normativity" (para. 2.16). As demonstrated in this study, although 1990s Black sitcoms are viewed as niche in mainstream White society, they are certainly quite mainstream for most Black Americans.

The ubiquitous nature of 1990s Black sitcoms also necessitates framing fandom in terms that are not exclusively about a close proximity or positive affect to the fan object. Black fans can often be characterized as engaging what I term as *ambi-fandom*, a form of fandom that is predicated on the ambivalence engendered by the content of the fan object or how other fans engage with the object (Bush & Johnson, 2018). Related to 1990s Black sitcoms, Black *ambi-fandom* sits between Gray's (2006) conceptions of anti-fandom and non-fandom. For Gray, anti-fans are those audience members who have a strong disdain for a fan object yet are very knowledgeable about the object. Anti-fans' knowledge about the object allows them to partake in conversations with other fans, despite their dislike for the object. The following quote from a participant in Gray's study on *The Simpsons* illustrates this point: "Even though I don't watch this show, I don't like this show, uh, I have to know about it to a certain degree... otherwise I will be excluded from the conversation of my friends" (p. 71). While the anti-fan of a television show may not watch the show, they develop their knowledge and opinions of the shows from the various paratexts surrounding them. As Black people have historically been underrepresented in mass media, Black audiences have employed anti-fandom as a response to Black media images that they may find reprehensible. Black audiences "have long negotiated the love for flawed texts that allow for attachment to quality despite the text's problematic content while integrating discussions of aesthetics and politics" (Wanzo, 2013, para. 3.1). While the anti-fan is defined by their intense feelings for their fan object, the opposite is true for non-fans as their feelings are more muted. Gray contends that the majority of fans could be described as non-fans, "watching when they can, rather than when they must, loving a text but watching it only occasionally, perhaps even at times out of a sense of duty, and hence blurring the boundary between non-fan and fan" (p. 74). Similar to the anti-fan and the non-fan, the *ambi-fan* may engage a fan object out of a sense of obligation, develop much of their knowledge of the fan object through

paratexts, and know a lot about the object, yet not possess strong feelings for the object. Considering that Black television viewers have historically had to make do with the limited representations available to them through the medium, ambi-fandom is a generative framework for understanding the complex nature of Black audience reading practices.

Participants can also be understood as engaging in what Williams (2011) terms as post-object fandom, which she describes as “fandom of any object which can no longer produce new texts” (p. 269). Williams distinguishes between the *on-going* text, which is in the process of producing new episodes and the *dormant* text which ceases to produce new episodes. Writing specifically about how the fan practices of *West Wing* fans changed after the show was cancelled, Williams acknowledges that fandom does not end as “people may continue to self-identify as fans of objects, persisting in watching DVDs, buying merchandise, or discussing the fan objects with fellow fans” (p. 269). Writing specifically about the afterlife of the cult television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Levine and Park (2007) note, “Television series, like vampires, are made to return from the dead. Indeed, the American commercial television economy is predicated upon revivals, re-emergences, and reappearances” (p. 4). Thus, the notion of endings and death in television are fraught to say the least. Instead, researchers must be attuned to the way that the “undead” series “take on new manifestations and new meanings as they are repositioned in different cultural contexts and historical periods” (p. 4).

### **Understanding Textuality**

Much of media fan culture is predicated not only on an interest in a single fan object but the ability to identify relationships across texts (Jenkins, 2014). Rejecting the hegemony of the single text as the primary means through which audiences make meaning through television, Fiske (1989) suggests analyzing textuality as a “process of making sense and pleasure” of television. For Fiske, textuality is predicated on intertextuality that only occurs “when people bring their different histories and subjectivities to the viewing process” (p. 57). Fiske troubles boundaries between the audience and text, dismissing the notion that they are distinct self-contained categories. He writes, “The television audience is not a social category like class, or race, or gender—everyone slips in or out of it in a way that makes nonsense of any categorical boundaries” (p. 56). While recognizing the utility of the term “text” for highlighting television’s “meaning-making potential”, Fiske leans towards textuality because its “abstraction signals its potentiality rather than its concrete existence” (p. 56). While noting that audiences do not have complete autonomy in their meaning-making practices, Fiske also pushes back against the notion that they make sense of a given televisual text in a way exclusively determined by its producers. He writes, “Television is not quite a do-it-yourself meaning kit, but neither is it a box of ready-made meanings or sale” (p. 59). Drawing on Barthes’ concept of the writerly text, Fiske reimagines the relationship between the text and the audience, describing television as a producerly text. He writes,

A producerly text does not prescribe either a set of meanings or a set of reading relations for the viewers: instead it delegates the production of meaning to the viewer-producer...it offers provocative spaces within which the viewer can use her or his already developed competencies (p. 63).

The polysemic nature of television makes it particularly malleable for audiences to produce their own meanings.

Furthermore, Fiske suggests that audiences are often imagined as reading television in ways that are more akin to how one might read a book, following a narrative from beginning to end. Instead, he notes, “television’s continuous flow is actually fragmented into an often-jarring experience of segments in which discontinuity, sequence and contradiction take precedence over continuity, consequence, and unity” (p. 63). Thus, the literate television viewer possesses a facility with abrupt plot changes and encountering disparate televisual elements in rapid succession. As a result, viewers connect these elements “according to the laws of association rather than those of consequence, logic, or cause and effect” (p. 63). For Fiske, these associations are “much looser, much less textually determined, and so offer the viewer more scope to make his or her own connections” (p. 63). Television’s segmentation leads to syntagmatic gaps in which viewers are able to write in their own connections.

Textuality is a necessary challenge to the static reading positions offered by Hall’s encoding-decoding model, which has been a highly influential in audience studies research. In “Encoding/Decoding,” Hall (2000) breaks away from the traditional communication studies model of uses and gratifications, which envisions communication as a linear process consisting of sender, message and receiver. Hall asserts that while producers may encode televisual texts with various codes, communication is not a one-way process as audiences decode the messages in several ways. Hall offers three reading positions for a media text. From the dominant-hegemonic position viewers take the “preferred reading” from the text with no resistance. Oppositional readings reject the dominant messages encoded in a text. According to Hall, the most frequent reading position sits between these two poles—the negotiated position. In this position, individuals neither entirely accept nor reject a text’s inscribed ideologies. Instead, an audience member accepts parts of the dominant messages that resonate with their values and reject those that do not. It is in oppositional readings that Hall locates the greatest site of ideological contestation.

Drawing on Barthes’ (1977) delineation between denotative and connotative meanings, Hall argues that the connotative signs’ discursive openness provides a better means for understanding how audiences find meaning in a media text. However, Hall reminds us that only oppositional readings operate outside the available codes. He writes, “Unless they are wildly aberrant, encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate” (p. 58). Audiences can read a media text against the grain only within the limitations encoded in that text.

For Gray (2006), the encoding/decoding model assumes that audiences consume texts in the same fashion. Gray writes that the three reading positions “make perfect sense when the text being reacted to is the same (the finished book or film), but television offers the added complication of partly and differently read texts” (p. 68). Gray’s observation relates to the fragmented nature of television consumption is particularly true when thinking about the potential ways that reruns circulate within a converged media culture (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). As the programs are remediated through various platforms, “Segments, even whole episodes, often slip into the ether: missing from file-sharing sites, left out of DVD packages, or rebroadcast in the middle of the night” (Griffin, 2011, p. 246). Turning to Black audience engagement with other forms of media may help scholars better understand how television viewers work with pieces of televisual texts.

### **Finding stories in the mix: What a TV scholar can learn from a dj?**

Advocating for studying Black fandom in sites that have long been ignored by fan studies scholars, Wanzo (2013) calls for folding hip-hop artists into fandom discourses. Drawing parallels between transformative fan practices of hip-hop artists' and members of communities traditionally highlighted in fan studies, Wanzo writes,

Hip-hop (like other forms of Black music in the Caribbean) is produced by people who lack cultural power and capital; they rework existing texts (some that they love, some that they hate), transforming people's reading of it in their community; and they challenge the hierarchies of copyright in their poaching of texts (para. 2.11).

Hip-hop artists, and their fans by extension, possess a form of literacy that strongly embraces textuality. Building on Jafa's contention that *flow*, *rupture*, and *layering* are key elements of hip-hop culture, Rose (1994) highlights the seemingly endless layering that occurs in hip-hop music. She writes,

The flow and motion of the initial bass or drum line in rap music is abruptly ruptured by scratching (a process that highlights as it breaks the flow of the base rhythm), or the rhythmic flow is interrupted by other musical passages. Rappers stutter and alternatively race through passages, always moving within the beat or in response to it, often using music as a partner in rhyme. These verbal moves highlight lyrical flow and points of rupture. Rappers layer meaning by using the same word to signify a variety of actions and objects; they call out to the DJ to 'lay down a beat,' which is expected to be interrupted, ruptured. DJ layers sounds literally one on top of the other, creating a dialogue between sampled sounds and words (p. 39).

Hip-hop's use of flow, layering, and rupturing is akin to the temporal logics that govern television.

According to Uricchio (2010) television's function as a time machine is predicated on its deployment of three elements related to temporality: sequence, interpenetration, and repetition. Building on Williams's (1975) concept of flow, Uricchio points to the ways that broadcasters sequence television programs over the course of the day to appeal to the needs and desires of constantly-changing groups of viewers. Repetition refers to the use and reuse of programming elements and footage among a single channel or across channels. While each of the three elements demonstrate some similarities between hip-hop time and television time, the concept of interpenetration is particularly generative for thinking about how time is often experienced as layered in both sites. Commercial breaks are one way that viewers experience interpenetration in television while watching television. Uricchio argues that interpenetration,

Brings textual elements of a different temporality and intent into the primary textual domain. They can be assimilated as part of a larger text (an aspirin ad can be read as inadvertently commenting upon the latest new from Afghanistan), or bracketed out as a minor annoyance (and ignored), but in either case they redefine the temporality of the primary text and thus the viewing experience and meanings. (p. 35)

Cultural critics have also noticed the resonance between hip-hop's relationship with time and that of television. Citing hip-hop's facility with discontinuities and rupture, Pareles (1992) posits that rap music is the first popular music form shaped by television's temporal sensibilities. Pareles hails rap as "the music of the television age" reflecting "the fast, fractured rhythms, the bizarre juxtapositions and the ceaseless self-promotion that are as much a part of television as logos and laugh tracks" (p. H1). He goes on to proclaim, "Where television shatters chronology and logic, rap shows us how to dance on the shards" (p. H1). Drawing parallels between the fragmentary nature of television and hip-hop music, Pareles writes,

A television viewer sees the same snippets again and again- as previews from a drama and minutes later in the drama itself, in out-of-context bits to promote the next week's sitcoms, in endlessly repeated commercials. Those prerecorded, chopped up, repeated snippets echo in music behind rappers: bits of old records, scratched on turntables or sampled through digital processors, atomized and then put together in new arrangements where rhythm is paramount and non-sequiturs are perpetual. A few words from an elder—from James Brown or Curtis Mayfield or Richard Pryor—can sum up a chorus or provide a transition, just like television's pre-taped cameos. (H28)

Pareles' assessment also gestures to the omnipresence of the past in both television and Black music, each functioning as vehicles for time travel. Cultural critic Greg Tate contends that sampling allows for "digitized race memory," providing a means of "collapsing all eras of Black music on to a chip" and what results is the ability to freely reference and cross-reference all eras of sound and music (Akompfrah, 1996). Sampling can be understood as a method through which Black musicians engage in what Steinskog (2018) identifies as sonic time traveling, which he describes as the "different layers of time coexisting in the sonic expression" (p. 45). Steinskog provides the following example of how a listener may experience sonic time travel. He writes,

The time travel could be seen as taking place in listening and focusing on the different elements, in a similar way to how listening to samples in a hip-hop track may take away the focus from the MC's lines and instead focus attention upon the sonic archive, but where the listening situation is one where one moves in and out of focus on a number of entities. (p. 45)

As I will demonstrate in chapter five, participants perform similar negotiations with time in their engagement with 1990s Black sitcoms.

Throughout this study, I draw on the language and concepts associated with Black music cultures to help make sense of ways that my study's participants engage 1990s sitcoms as a form of heritage. As Zuberi (2007) contends, "Black music culture seems an appropriate portal through which to examine the emerging media architecture of remembrance and to investigate perceptions of (technological) change" (p. 286). Reimagining the television as a sampling drum machine or two turntables and a mixer serves as a precondition for understanding how shows that have been out of production for over twenty years continue to affect Black audiences. As Eshun (1998) argues that "producers are already pop theorists", the insights and techniques associated with artists such as Texas mixtape king DJ Screw or Jamaican dub master Lee

“Scratch” Perry, whose music Eshun describes as being stalked by “sitcom ghosts”, provide a unique filter through which to read participants’ 1990s sitcom fandom [p. -004, 065].

Traditional approaches to television audience research were limited in its capacity to help me understand the affective dimensions of the Black television heritage and how my participants engage it. Participants often described their affinity for 1990s Black sitcoms as rooted in the programs’ ability to encapsulate a “vibe” associated with the era. And while scholars have tackled television’s affective properties in a variety of forms, it is through the language and concepts associated with Black music, that I argue scholars can understand the resonance of the Black televisual past. Writing about the role of vibe in the music of soul singer Roberta Flack, King (2007) describes vibe as

Ambient energy that can either be embodied auratically (a person ‘gives off’ a certain type of vibe) or exist as nonphysical matter (‘there was a strange vibe in the air’). Felt rather than physically perceived, vibe is more effectively qualified than quantified. In musical performance, a ‘positive’ or ‘soulful’ vibe refers to collective intimacy, the pleasurable feeling of oneness and synchronicity within say, a dance club or live concert. Such a vibe can be generated between people communing on a musical and spiritual level. Here, vibe is a real-time ‘presence’ that musicians often deliberately strive to capture’ (p. 173).

Thus, as Vieira de Oliveira contends taking musicians seriously as theorists and methodologists inverts a tendency among scholars to take a “top-down approach” to their work, “one in which *a theory* is applied to a vernacular manifestation (as sound, listening practice, or music) as a means of framing it within a certain school of thought” (p. 45; italics in original). Eshun argues that through such an approach scholars misses that theory is “everywhere you looked, and everywhere you listened” (Lovink, 2000, para. 10). Thus, instead of trying to “apply Heidegger to Parliament-Funkadelic”, Eshun proposes “taking Parliament to read Heidegger” (para. 10)<sup>2</sup>.

After surveying academic research on television and music reception over a ten-year period, Zaborowski and Dhaenen (2016) contend that, “Despite numerous connections between reception and sound, the audible sphere has not fascinated audience scholars to the extent the visual sphere has, and people’s engagements with music remain unexplored in detail” (p. 457). A turn to the sonic as a way of thinking about how Black audiences makes sense of television challenges the privileging of the visual that often permeates the academy. As Conquergood (2002) writes, “Dominant epistemologies that link knowing with seeing are not attuned to meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context” (p. 146).

Thus, some of the modes expressed through Black music criticism are particularly useful for expanding how one understands the context in which participants receive 1990s Black sitcoms.

---

<sup>2</sup> Gray (2005) observes that like many artists, music scholars such as Eshun and Paul Miller are particularly tepid in regards to utility of social theory in explicate insights about Black sound cultures. He writes, “Although they are inheritors and beneficiaries of a generation of cultural studies and poststructuralist theory, those most enthusiastic and versed in making and evaluating black techno-soundings seem skeptical (even dismissive) about the role of critical academic-cultural-theory for helping make sense of the music and the techno-imaginary that they evoke and celebrate” (p. 152).



Writing specifically about the work of cultural critics like Kodwo Eshun and Paul Miller aka DJ Spooky, Gray (2005) observes that they "deploy their commentary as if they were performing on their turntables and computers in clubs, constantly shifting language, mood, and modality of their critical engagement as if they were indeed handling so many tracks in a mix" (p. 152). Echoing the utility of concept of the mix in cultural criticism, Weheliye (2006) argues,

As a mode of cultural criticism and practice, the mix brings together disparate elements, but not in the manner suggested by the notions of 'pastiche' and 'bricolage' as they appear in postmodern literary theory; the mix offers a strategy for the construction of modern temporality that results not from the randomness of irony evoked by these terms. Instead it creates transversal, non-empirical space that coexists with other components. (p. 83)

As the medium has moved from a broadcaster-centered model to one that grants more control to the viewer, the television audience can be understood as receiving television in increasingly fragmented manners, as mixes.

Considering the dynamic nature of televisual textuality, particularly related to the residual circulation of past television, Eshun's (1998) concept of sonic fictions provides a complementary lens through which to read audience's various "moments of reception" (Fiske, 1989). For Eshun (2013), the sonic fiction should be understood as

The convergence of the organization of sound with a fictional system whose fragments gesture towards but fall short of the satisfactions of narratives. A sonic fiction is assembled from track subtitles, the instructions in runout grooves, the statements of labels, the graphic images embedded within the support system of the record or the CD or the file, all of which feed into and reinforce each other to form a plane of consistency (p. 138).

Schulze (2013) argues that the utility of sonic fictions for those in music and sound studies, is that it disrupts scholars' comfort with traditional approaches to research that "need to be historicized and scrutinized in their main and often compulsive concern with a rather culturally-specific urge for linear, almost obsessive consistency, with anonymous reproducibility of results and with a decontextualized objectification all often contrived and morally-executed categories" (para. 15). For those in television studies, sonic fictions offer another layer for thinking through how the various points of contact with vintage television potentially merge to produce not only cogent narratives for audiences but also feelings of affinity, ambivalence, and abhorrence.

### Chapter 3: Methods

In this chapter, I outline the methods I employed in this study. This study uses qualitative research methods through semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus groups, and textual analyses. For Creswell (2014), qualitative research

[b]egins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative research use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentations includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (p. 44)

Traditionally television audience researchers have favored qualitative research methods, with a particular emphasis on ethnography (Bird, 2013; Gillespie, 1995; Morley, 2005; Swink, 2017). Through ethnographic methods, Gillespie (1995) argues, media researchers can gain “an intimate understanding of young people’s lives, their world views, aspirations, feelings and the social and personal tensions which they experience” (p. 37). For Gillespie, developing such insight is “a pre-requisite to the understanding [young people’s] uses of TV” (p. 37). Much of this audience research has focused on viewers’ meaning practices with specific televisual texts (Ang, 1985; Bird, 1996; Haggins, 2000; Havens, 2001; Spigel & Jenkins, 1991). However, Wood and Taylor (2008) observe in recent years there has been a shift within television studies towards privileging convergence and explorations of new media, rendering as passé research that examines television as “a discrete entity”. Wood and Taylor argue that such scholarship frames new media concerns around connectivity as diametrically opposed to the meaning-making practices generally associated with work on old media. This shift potentially creates “a hierarchy in which television’s established scholarship can be neatly bypassed, thereby theoretically reconfiguring audience attachments as overly mechanistic engagements” (p. 144). However, Wood and Taylor contend that connectivity has always been central to television as a medium. Specifically, citing Wood’s (2009) study on women’s engagement with talk shows, the authors argue that “audiences formed their appreciation of shows based on their ability to feel socially ‘connected’ to hosts and topics under discussion” (Wood & Taylor, 2008, p. 147).

The current study could be understood as what Gilroy (2015) describes as a retro audience research project because of its focus on the residual circulation of past media as well as its deployment of traditional qualitative research methods. As part of her graduate-level media course, Gilroy (2015) and her students conducted an audience reception study on the 2012 reboot of the primetime soap opera *Dallas* (1978-91). Using Ien Ang’s groundbreaking study *Watching Dallas* as a case study, Gilroy and her students remixed Ang’s concepts and methodologies, testing their utility for understanding television audiences in the era of web 2.0. The research team attempted to stay as true to Ang’s original research question and methodology as possible. Whereas Ang solicited letters about women’s responses to *Dallas* in a Dutch magazine, Gilroy and her students asked for written responses to the *Dallas* reboot through social media. The team slightly altered Ang’s original question, “making only changes that were necessary to reflect the

different circumstances of our project and to increase the quality and quantity of responses” (Raj, Wale, Spoellmink, Dania, & Gilroy, 2015, para. 2.5). Gilroy admits that the return to Ang’s work and the *Dallas* reboot engenders not only nostalgia in the study’s participants but its researchers as well. She writes,

My memory of watching *Dallas* (1978-91) and of the excitement of reading *Watching Dallas* as an undergraduate soon after its English publication was part of the context within which the audience research was conducted, as was a certain nostalgia for the golden age of TV studies. (para. 1.4)

For Gilroy, a return to *Watching Dallas* and the *Dallas* franchise qualifies as a form of what she deems as strategic nostalgia. She writes, “To be strategically nostalgic about past texts and research methods involves both (the construction of) affective memories and critical reflection” (para. 1.3). To Gilroy, such a return to the methods employed in canonical texts such as *Watching Dallas* offers “a way of making visible the emotional investments and aesthetic judgments of ordinary viewers, who are perhaps somewhat unfashionable in the age of media creativity” (para 1.4). She continues, noting that researchers may “have to take the risk of nostalgia in order to have any purchase on viewers who are not ‘producers’” (para. 1.4). Thus, my study is retro in that it employs decidedly analog methods to understand the assessments of ordinary viewers, who may not produce tertiary cultural artifacts like fan fiction, yet maintain strong emotional investments in their media object.

### **Research Site**

I conducted this study over 20 months from March 2015 until November 2016 at West Coast University (WCU), a large public research-one institution in the western United States. The university’s total enrollment of over 40,000 students includes doctoral students, masters’ students and an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 25,000 students. The university has a highly-competitive admission policy, accepting less than 20 percent of applicants. WCU’s incoming freshman have an average grade point average of 4.41. One-fifth of WCU students are the first in their family to attend college. There are approximately 900 African-American students, comprising three percent of the undergraduate student population. Almost 60 percent of Black students are from poor or working-class families. According to a survey administered by the university’s equity and inclusion office, when compared with other racial groups, black students rate the campus racial climate lower. Seventy-six percent of Black students strongly agree, agree or somewhat agree with the statement “I feel that I belong on campus.” Eighty-six percent of Latino students, 88% of Asian students and 90% of white students feel they belong on campus. Only 52% of Black students feel that black students are respected at WCU. In recent years, police have intervened in protests related to speaking engagements of conservative pundits. The campus has experienced several racially-charged incidents including the hanging of a noose at a fraternity house. Despite the low percentage of Black students at WCU, the university’s 900 Black students offered a diverse set of Black voices. As an internationally renowned university, WCU draws students from all over the world. As a result, there was the opportunity to interview international Black students about 1990s Black sitcoms that have traveled outside the United States through syndication and the Internet. As each student had completed at least one semester at WCU, there was also the potential to consider how their experience in the university’s environment possibly impacted how they read the sitcoms.

Finally, college is an important time in Black students' racial identity formation as it is time when students may become more conscious in how they are performing their racial identity (Stewart, 2015). One way this may manifest is through students choosing to consume media that explicitly addresses race or that they deem as projecting positive images of Black people. Tatum (2003) notes that the black college students' are often "energized by the new information he or she is learning—angry perhaps that it wasn't available sooner—but excited to find out that there is more to Africa than Tarzan movies and there is more to Black history than victimization" (p. 76). All participants and locations have been provided pseudonyms.

### **Individual Interviews**

In order to uncover participants' interpretations of 1990s Black sitcoms, it was important that I understood their engagement with the programs in their own words. For this reason, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants. For Morley (2005), the interview is a valuable method for audience research because it provides the researcher with access to "the respondents' conscious opinions and statements" as well as "the linguistic terms and categories...through which respondents construct their words and their own understanding of their activities" (p. 173). Through the interviews, I gathered data on participants' general media preferences and I learned about their affinities for specific shows.

I conducted 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting between 30 minutes and an hour each. All interviews were face-to-face and took place on WCU's campus except for one which was conducted at a coffee shop a few blocks from the participant's home. The interviews were semi-structured in that while the interview protocol served as a guide for the interviews, I did not ask participants every question in the protocol. Nor did I ask the questions in the order that they appeared on the protocol. Thus, no two interviews were the same. Furthermore, as I listened intently to participants' answers and I asked follow up questions thus veering from the protocol. Ultimately, I employed these strategies in an attempt to ensure that interviews were conversational and that participants felt as if they "at the center of the discussion" and thus felt "comfortable and confident to share and dissect their perceptions about what they observed while viewing television media content" (King, 2013, p. 104).

I opened each interview with a series of biographic questions that often touched on how participants self-identified racially, their educational trajectory to WCU, and the amount of television they watched on a daily and weekly basis. Participants were then asked to reflect on their favorite Black television shows, how these shows represented Blackness, episodes or scenes they related to, and how television influenced their social, professional, and educational aspirations. The interviews were particularly valuable in helping to "illuminate which programmes have left a mark and how they have become part of television heritage" (Dhoest, 2015, p. 71). Because my project was chiefly interested in how participants made meaning of 1990s Black sitcoms in a variety of different "presents", it was within interviews that participants reflected on their engagement with the programs over the course of their lives. In this sense, the interviews were "retrospective, presenting memories that are constructed in the present within a particular interviewing context, reflecting on the past but inevitably influenced by subsequent events" (Dhoest, 2007, p. 57). I provided participants with a \$10 Amazon gift card as compensation for their time. I recorded interviews and focus groups using an audio recorder. In addition to the audio recorder, I also took notes in my note book.

### **Focus Groups**

After conducting individual interviews, I contacted participants who were particularly interested in the study or who exhibited strong affinities for 1990s Black sitcoms to ask if they were interested in participating in a focus group. Offering an admittedly and intentionally broad definition, Morgan (1996) defines focus groups as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (p. 136). The key characteristic that separates focus groups from individual interviews is that the unit of analysis is the interactions between group members. Focus groups have served as a valuable method for generating data for education research (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Roberts, Bell, & Murphy, 2008; Yosso et al., 2009), as well as media consumption research (Bird, 1996; Childs, 2005; Laughey, 2006; Squires & Haggins, 2012). Focus groups allow researchers to “elicit perceptions, information, attitudes and ideas from a group in which each participant possesses experience with the phenomenon under study” (Kelly, 2003, p. 50). Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007) assert that focus groups are particularly useful for exploratory projects for which there is not a lot of available information. The focus group also allowed me to follow up on themes that emerged from the individual interviews. I was particularly surprised to learn that most participants cited *Martin* as their favorite 1990s sitcom, a fact that I explored during the focus groups.

I conducted two focus groups, each with three participants. Despite conducting such few focus groups, the sessions offered a data process that differed from individual interviews offering the opportunity to observe participants in a collective viewing environment. Focus groups were capped at three participants to ensure that each participant was able to speak and that participants were able to respond to each other’s comments. The sessions occurred in classrooms on WCU’s campus. Participants received an additional \$10 Amazon gift card for participating in the focus groups. I conducted the groups on consecutive days in March 2016. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. In each session, we screened the pilot episode of *Martin* and rapper Big Sean’s music video for his song, *Play No Games*, which recreates aesthetics and scenes from *Martin*. Participants also viewed and discussed Internet memes that appropriated *Martin*. After screening the episode, I asked participants to reflect on how the episode depicts Black men and women, how is Blackness signified in the episode, and which characters or scenes resonate for them. The sessions also provided an opportunity to gain clarity on the notion that *Martin* is a classic television show, a sentiment that participants consistently expressed in their individual interviews.

I conducted single-gender focus groups in hopes of eliciting perspectives that are possibly muted in mixed-gender groups. As Morgan (1996) writes, “Even if the behavior of men and women does not differ greatly on a given topic, discussion still may flow more smoothly in groups that are homogeneous rather than mixed with regard to sex” (p. 143). This may be particularly pronounced within the context of a study on television, which has often been gendered as feminine within academic and popular discourse (Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner, & Warth, 1989; Spigel, 2001). However, I was unable to conduct a focus group with male participants because none expressed interest in participating in the study beyond the initial interview.

Like the individual interviews, focus groups were semi-structured. I attempted to create a free-flowing conversation amongst participants by asking open-ended questions and allowing participants considerable latitude with the length of their responses. The focus groups revealed “the ways in which the sustained, analytical discussion encouraged by the focus group moderators differed from participant descriptions of ‘naturally occurring’ talk about TV comedy, such as the re-performance of catch-phrases” (Kalviknes Bore, 2012, p. 4). While participants

described the joy they experienced watching and discussing 1990s Black sitcoms with their family and peers, the discussion about *Martin* was largely absent of explicit expressions of pleasure such as laughing. On one hand, this could be the result of the problematic themes expressed in the episode (which I will explore in greater depth in chapter 6). The often-stilted nature of the conversation could also be the result of the group dynamics of each session. In the first focus group, it was clear that none of the three participants knew each other. In the second group, participants were clearly more familiar with one another, noting that they had encountered each other in courses and through campus clubs and organizations. Participants may have been cautious in expressing controversial opinions with students with whom they were unfamiliar “because they had yet to establish norms and boundaries for appropriate tastes and behavior” (Kalviknes Bore, 2012, p. 19). Despite acknowledging focus group’s limitations as a method, Smithson (2000) writes, “While some perspectives are not available in a method that highlights public discourses, certain things only arise, or are much more likely to arise, in public rather than private discourse” (p. 114). Focus groups are most effective when combined with other methods (Wildemuth & Jordan, 2009). The combination of semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups helped facilitate data that reflected both public and private discourses.

### **Textual Analysis**

In addition to collecting data through interviews and focus groups, I also performed close textual readings of the 1990s Black sitcoms participants referenced during interviews and focus groups. Understanding how participants make making of 1990s Black sitcoms requires “interpreting [the televisual] texts alongside talk about [the] texts” (Gillespie, 1992, p. 79). Thus, textual analysis served as a means through which interview and focus group data was “analyzed discursively and related intertextually...to the original text (such as a TV program) that occasioned them” (Fiske, 1990, p. 89). Acknowledging that there is no consensus on how to analyze and interpret visual texts, McKee (2001) describes a process for performing textual analyses. Scholars engaging in textual analyses must recognize that there is not a single correct interpretation of a text and that textual analyses are not about determining a text’s accuracy. Instead, McKee pushes scholars to consider a text’s likely interpretation, which requires establishing a text’s context. Establishing context also requires understanding a text’s genre and how conventions associated with that genre shape how audiences read a given text. Finally, likely interpretations are understood by looking at the larger public context of a text.

As a stand-alone method for understanding how audiences make sense of television, Creeber (2006) argues that textual analysis runs the risk of standing in as the sole interpretation of a media text. He writes, “Without any audience or empirical evidence to back up these assumptions, textual analysis is simply a matter of guess work—offering unfounded and possibly misleading interpretations on behalf of an audience who is not allowed to speak for itself” (p. 82). Countering the notion that if media researchers want to determine the likely interpretation of a given text they would be better served interviewing audience members instead of performing textual analyses, McKee (2001) posits that researchers often learn “that audience members draw from publically available knowledges in order to make sense of texts” (p. 145). Thus, McKee argues that textual analysis helps highlight these knowledges.

Not only did I provide descriptions and analyses of the episodes and scenes participants referenced, I also analyzed the various paratexts surrounding the programs, which Gray (2010) defines as the texts that prepare us to engage a text. Thus, understanding contemporary black audience reception of 1990s black sitcoms requires recognizing that it “depend[s] not just on the

careful reading of the texts of one program, but on some understanding of the discursive struggle and intertextuality operating in television and other cultural sites of society” (Gray, 1995, p. 9). Gray (2010) points to the limits of close readings of media texts, noting that they “tell us little about how a viewer arrived at a text” (p. 24). Gray notes,

To choose to watch a movie, for instance, we may factor in any of the following: the actors, the production personnel, the quality of the previews, reviews, interviews, the poster, a marketing campaign, word of mouth, what cinema it is playing at (or what channel it is on), or the material on which it is based (whether prequel, sequel, or adaptation). All of these are texts in their own right, often meticulously constructed by their producers in order to offer certain meanings and interpretations. (p. 25)

As many participants framed their fandom for 1990s Black sitcoms within their broader fandom for the show’s stars, my analysis also required looking at the actors as texts. Zook (1999) argues that audience reception practices are informed not only by the texts but the extra-textual elements associated with the show’s stars. Zook asserts that for audiences “the real-life politics and documentary experiences of these celebrities, as well as their respective stand-up comedy, feature films, and musical performances” contribute to the “rich and unexpected layers of meaning” associated with “the shows in which they starred” (p. 53). Langer (1981) notes that unlike film, which relies on a star system which inserts distance between actors and the audience, television is informed by a personality system. He writes,

The personality system is cultivated almost exclusively as ‘part of life’, whereas the star system always has the ability to place distance between itself and its audiences through its insistence on ‘the exceptional...the personality system works directly to construct and foreground intimacy and immediacy...contact with television personalities has regularity and predictability;... television personalities ‘play’ themselves...personalities are distinguished for their representatives, their typicality, their ‘will to ordinariness’, to be accepted, normalized, experienced as familiar. (p. 355)

Through the television industry practice of off-network stripping, series that originally ran on broadcast networks like Fox are available for air on other channels. Through syndication series that originally aired weekly can become fixtures in a channel’s programming airing multiple times a week, often multiple times daily. Participants reflected on watching shows like *Martin*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *Moesha* daily. As a result, participants expressed feeling not only an intimacy with their characters but the shows stars as well. Therefore, in analyzing participants’ reads of the individual situation comedies it was also critical that I was cognizant of the ways that Martin Lawrence, Will Smith, Queen Latifah, and Brandy Norwood continued to circulate in the Black popular culture landscape.

### *Data Analysis*

I conducted interviews and focus groups until I achieved data saturation which is “the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change in the codebook” (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 65). Guest, Bunce and Johnson argue that within

a relatively homogenous group, data saturation is achieved at twelve interviews. I used similar studies to help determine the number of participants I needed to interview for this study. In her dissertation on television's impact on female undergraduates' academic and gender identities, King (2013) interviewed 23 participants and conducted two focus groups. I interviewed 26 participants, comprised of 15 females and 12 males, and conducted two focus groups.

I transcribed interview and focus groups verbatim using InqScribe transcription software. After transcribing the interviews and focus groups, I took a decidedly analog approach to analyzing the data. I printed the transcripts and began open coding them. I wrote notes and headings in the margins while reading the interviews line-by-line. Describing the process of open coding, Elo and Kyngäs (2008) note, "The written material is read through again, and as many headings as necessary are written down in the margins to describe all aspects of the content" (p. 109). I paid particular attention to keywords and themes that emerged that spoke to participants' engagement with and meaning-making related to 1990s Black situation comedies. My initial reads through the data generated 40 codes, which were primarily related to themes participants identified in the programs' narratives as well as the feelings that the shows engendered in them. These codes include *images of women*, *black love*, *fatherhood*, *realistic*, and *seeing yourself*. I used constant comparison to analyze both focus group and interview data. In the first stage of constant comparison analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009), the researcher chunks data into smaller units. Each smaller unit was then given a code. Codes were then placed into larger categories. Finally, I identified broader themes that emerged from the data. For example, one of the major themes that emerged during data analysis was the ways that 1990s Black sitcoms engendered feelings of community. This was understood as I placed codes such as *bonding with peers*, *watching with family*, and *expected to know shows* under a larger umbrella of engendering community.

By eschewing computer-assisted analysis, I avoided one of the chief pitfalls of employing computer-assisted analysis—their ability to “at the push of a button, generate neatly packaged chunks of data” (James, 2012, p. 567). James goes on to warn, “Dealing with the blocks of often de-contextualized and disembodied data segments that computers can churn out may, if we are not mindful, lead us to forget the huge complexities of our subjects' lives which, as analysts, we set out to understand. The more interesting question may be not how many people said X with Y, but why they said it at all” (p. 568). Through hand-coding and repeatedly listening to the interviews and focus groups I became immersed in the data. Such immersion allowed me to be attuned to nuances that I may have missed if I had not taken such a time-consuming approach.

Data analysis required remembering that research is as much about craft as it is about technique. And as Mills (1959) reminds us, craft often demands combining “a playfulness of mind” with a “truly fierce drive to make sense of the world” (p. 211). To this end I drew inspiration from Jackson (2005), who describes the various tricks he used to get over his shyness while conducting fieldwork about Black life in Harlem. Initially, Jackson pretended to be a famous anthropologist while interviewing residents, building up the courage to approach potential respondents by asking himself WWZLNHD or “What would Zora Neal Hurston do?” Eventually, recognizing the limitations of channeling the spirits of his intellectual ancestors—acknowledging that some would not have access to or been tolerant of many of the people he interviewed—Jackson developed an “ethnographic superhero” alter-ego—Anthroman. Jackson writes, “Anthroman was a way for me to envision stepping outside of myself, to be fearless about social science research by visualizing myself protected from harm by my own superhuman powers of observation and analysis” (p. 25). He continues, “Anthroman spotted ethnographic



significances where mere mortals saw only bricks and mortar, high rises and graffitied storefronts, angry-black-male-family-deserters, and the welfare queens who emasculated them” (p. 28).

Just as John L. Jackson created Anthroman to help him deal with his shyness, data analysis required that I turn to my own creative impulses. To a degree, I asked myself what would producer/djs like DJ Premier, 9<sup>th</sup> Wonder, J Dilla, or DJ Screw do with the data in front of them. In the case of Screw, he would have slowed down the entire process. Screw rose to prominence in the Southwestern United States thanks to his innovative mixtapes where he slowed down the pitch of rap and R&B records while repeating key elements of the songs. Diduck (2014) notes that Screw’s techniques not only extended the songs duration but also shifted “the frequencies reproduced in any given song further down the spectrum, making the bass bassier, the vocals deeper, the melodies lower” (p. 106). For Diduck, chopping and screw slowed “the affective of sonic frequency down to such a degree that it was *felt* as much as heard” (p. 107). In a similar vein, my slowed down approach to data analysis allowed me to hear the affective registers that 1990s Black sitcoms established with my study’s participants. As Shahjahan (2015) contends, “Slowing down is about focusing on building relationships, not about being fixed on products, but accepting and allowing for uncertainty and being at peace without knowing outcomes” (p. 497). By chopping and screwing the data analysis process, I was able to be attuned to the deep resonances that existed between my study’s participants’ and 1990s Black sitcoms.

## Participants

I employed purposive sampling as participants were recruited “based on predetermined criteria about the extent to which the selected subjects could contribute to the research study” (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996, p. 58). This study is concerned with the experiences and perspectives of self-identified Black undergraduate students. I used snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008) to identify Black undergraduates who were fans of 1990s black sitcoms. After conducting initial interviews with students whom I identified as having an affinity for 1990s Black sitcoms, these participants suggested friends and associates that they believed would be interested in participating in the study. I visited African-American Studies, Media Studies, and Theater and Performance Studies classes to recruit students to participate in the study. Students who were interested in participating in the study contacted me and we scheduled individual interviews. Some participants informed their friends about the study and some of those students reached out to me about participating. One participant circulated an email about the study to members of a Black student listserv.

All students identified as Black and were between the ages of 18 and 23-years-old. Students reported watching an average of 2.31 hours of television daily and 12.37 hours per week. Students’ class level break down as follows: (4) seniors, (8) juniors, (4) sophomores, and (10) first-year students. Nineteen students were from Southern California, six students were from Northern California, and one was an exchange student from London. Furthermore, six students understood their Blackness in relationship to their parents’ country of origin, with four identifying as Nigerian, one as Jamaican, and another as African. While outside the scope of this study, considering how participants’ regional and national conceptions of Blackness impact their engagement with 1990s Black situation comedies deserves further exploration in future research. For example, the children of Nigerian immigrants in my study described experiences with their parents that harkened to Ogbu and Simon’s (1998) conception of voluntary minorities. These

students attributed their parents' affinity for *The Cosby Show* to the way the show reinforced the parents' belief that "the opportunity to succeed or make 'progress' is better in the United States than elsewhere" and "that what makes a person successful in the United States is education and hard work" (p. 170). While 25 of the 26 participants were from California, any attempts to collapse Northern and Southern Californians under a "Californian" perspective echoes "the quiet knowledge that West Coast blackness is a narrative that has yet to be fully explored in the African American grain" (Stallings, 2009, p. 107). Considering that the most popular programs amongst participants were set in Los Angeles, Detroit, New York, and Virginia respectively, participants' regional understandings of Blackness can potentially inform the realism they attribute to the shows representations of Blackness. Again, while outside the scope of this study, these are themes I would like to explore in future research.

### *Brief Biography of Participants*

In the following chapters, I primarily draw on the insights of participants gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups. To help contextualize their words, I am providing the following brief biographies of my study's participants. As I noted earlier, all participants were given pseudonyms.

**Candace** is an 18-year-old freshman from San Diego. She is a pre-business major. She racially identifies as African-American. She described her family as very low-income. She described the various forms of microaggressions she experiences as a Black student at WCU. Candace attends WCU on a full-ride academic scholarship. Of the 250 WCU students in her scholarship program, only three of them are Black. She describes feeling great angst when she attends meetings with other scholars in the program. She is particularly critical of the rampant colorism in popular media, pointing to the negative impact such images have on Black girls.

**Caron** is 23-years-old and is in her junior year. She is a legal studies major. She is an exchange student from London and racially identifies as Black-African. Upon entering college, Caron wanted to be an attorney. However, after encountering the strenuous workload associated with studying law, Caron decided that she no longer wants to practice law. Caron described growing up in a neighborhood where many of her peers grew up without their fathers in the home.

**Christopher** is an 18-year-old freshman. He majors in media studies. His career goal is to become an entertainment attorney. Christopher grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Los Angeles. He racially identifies as Black. Christopher attends WCU on a full academic scholarship as part of a prestigious national scholarship program. While in high school Christopher was an all-league basketball player. Christopher walked onto WCU's basketball team. He grew up in a single parent home with his father as the primary parent.

**Corey** is 21-years-old and is a graduating senior. He racially identifies as Black. He is a theatre, dance, and performance studies major. He grew up in Los Angeles. Corey grew up with his mother and father and his siblings. Corey framed getting a degree from WCU as being extremely important to his family and stated that even if he was not getting the degree for himself, he had to press on to show his younger siblings that they could also earn a college degree. Corey described being one of the first in his family to go to college.

**Dennis** is a 20-year-old from city in the Mojave Desert 70 miles north of Los Angeles. He racially identifies as Black. He is an African-American studies major. Dennis was involved in an African American male achievement program at his high school that helped prepare him for college. While his high school was not majority Black, the majority of teachers and students he encountered were Black. This was due to his involvement in the program. He is proud that he was able to attend WCU despite growing up in a city that has a reputation within California as a hotbed for methamphetamine distribution. He was raised by his single mother. He stated that television greatly influenced his desire for upward social mobility and a stable family life.

**Elise** is 18-year-old freshman from Sacramento. She is majoring in Public Health and is on a pre-med track. She racially identifies as African-American. Her parents are immigrants from Nigeria. Because she went to predominantly Latino schools, she said that she was not around a lot of black people. She credits television with helping her have a richer understanding of Black culture in the United States. While her parents panned much Black television, they encouraged her to watch *The Cosby Show* because the upper-middle class characters reflected the values that they thought Elise should embody.

**Ella** is an 18-year-old freshman from a suburb 40 miles north of Los Angeles. She is a sprinter on WCU's track team. Ella racially identifies as Black. Her father is Black and her mother is white. She also grew up with her three older brothers. Ella described encountering people who are surprised that she and her three siblings have the same father and mother. She was critical of how easily she believes that Black and non-Black people accept stereotypes about Black people. She discussed her experiences being told that she was white washed because of how she enunciates her words.

**Jason** is 23-year-old fifth year senior. He majors in history of art. His career goal is to become a college professor. He grew up in an affluent suburb 20 miles southeast of Los Angeles. He transferred to WCU from a junior college near his home. Jason racially identifies as Black and is mixed race with a Black father and white mother. He described attending a very racially mixed high school that rated as the top high school in the country because of its students' academic achievement. Because he was mixed-raced, Jason described not feeling that he was 'black enough' throughout most of his high school experience. He stated that his Black peers told him that he was not Black and called him an Oreo.

**John** is a 19-year old freshman. He grew up in a suburb 40 miles east of Los Angeles. He is majoring in architecture. Growing up in what he describes as a Nigerian household, John stated that he did not always understand the cultural references in Black television. John states that most of what he learned about Black people in high school was relegated to slavery and the civil rights movement. He notes that during his time at WCU, he has learned to be more critical of media representations of Black people. He credits WCU's Black student community with helping him feel at home on campus. However, he does not believe that he has had any experiences he has been racialized on campus. He said he sometimes believes that Black students often erroneously read encounters with non-Black students as racist.

**Joi** is a 19-year-old freshman. She grew up in a majority-Latino suburb of Los Angeles. She is double majoring in cognitive science and ethnic studies. She racially identifies as African-American. Joi credits television with helping her explore aspects of Blackness that were often absent from her daily life. Because she lived in a majority-Latino neighborhood and was in honors courses she was rarely around a lot of Black students. Joi lamented the lack of openly LGBTQ and disabled characters on television. She acknowledged that she may be more accepting of such characters because WCU's campus culture is generally tolerant of people from marginalized groups.

**Keisha** is a 21-year-old junior, who was born in Oakland but grew up in a working-class city 75 miles from Oakland. She is double majoring in African American studies and Theater, Dance, and Performance studies. Keisha racially identifies as African-American but prefers to be referred to as Black. She described attending a high school that was racially diverse. Keisha said she was often told that she was white-washed and as a result she says developed an ability to code-switch. She was a straight-A student. She credits her coursework at WCU for helping her better identify stereotypes in popular media. She was particularly critical of what she deems as one-dimensional representations of Black women in media. She championed rapper Nicki Minaji's ability to take on multiple characters as a way to challenge static constructions of Black femininity.

**Lorenzo** is 20-years-old and is in his junior year. He racially identifies as Black and Jamaican. He is a disciplinary studies major focusing on food security. He grew up in Los Angeles. When Lorenzo initially entered WCU, he played on the basketball team and had a full scholarship. After his sophomore year, Lorenzo quit the basketball team focused on academics. He was raised by a single mother.

**Marisa** is an 18-year-old freshman from San Diego. She is a math major. She said she relates to characters like Carlton Banks from the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and Moesha Mitchell from *Moesha* because they are driven and studious. She joined a group for Black science and engineering students to connect with other Black STEM majors. Marisa also tutors other undergraduate students in math.

**Mia** is an 18-year-old freshman from an unincorporated municipality in Southern California. She is majoring in molecular cellular biology. She racially identifies as Black. She cites television as not only impacting her view of Black people but states that television has particularly profound impact on how non-Black people view her. She stated that non-Black people often base their expectations of how she performs her Blackness on what they have seen on television. She believes that her non-Black friends hold her in high regard because she does not embody the stereotypes of Black people that they see on television.

**Michelle** is a 19-year-old freshman from a suburb 50 miles east of Los Angeles. She is a public health major. She racially identifies as African-American and Latina. She states that because of what she deems as the negative portrayals of Black women on reality television, she attempts to be polite to others to counteract such stereotypes. She credits the material she encountered in a lower-division African American studies course with helping her better identify stereotypes about Black people in media. Michelle lauded her experience living on a Black-

themed floor in her dorm as helping her combat some of the isolation that comes with being a Black student on WCU's campus.

**Monica** is a 22-year-old senior from the northern California city where WCU is located. She is majoring in African American studies and plans to enter a graduate program to pursue her Ph.D. after graduating from WCU. As an undergraduate student, Monica has worked with various programs aimed at providing support to under-represented students. Monica's ultimate career goal is to become a university professor. She spoke in-depth about the feelings of isolation he experiences at WCU and the various forms of microaggressions she encounters. While describing herself as a huge fan of past Black media, Monica credits the knowledge she acquired in African American studies courses at WCU with helping her become a more critical consumer of Black media.

**Otis** is 19-years-old and is double majoring in legal studies and philosophy. He racially identifies as Black. He grew up in Los Angeles. His career goal is to become an attorney who practices sports and entertainment law. He eventually wants to become a general manager of a professional soccer team. Otis was raised by a single mother. He stated that getting a degree from WCU was particularly important because he has lot of people depending on him.

**Raina** is a 19-year-old sophomore. She intends to major in social welfare. She is from a suburb 60 miles east of Los Angeles. She racially identifies as Black and is mixed-race. She credits her grandmother as the person who introduced her to past Black media. She said because her grandmother looks Latina, she was worried that her grandchildren would not "feel" Black. Raina discussed the responsibility she feels to address classmates when they say something problematic about Black people.

**Randall** is a 20-years-old senior. He is a molecular cell biology major. He racially identifies as Black. He is from a suburb 60 miles east of Los Angeles. Randall grew up with his seven siblings and was raised in a single-parent home by his mother. Growing up in a home where his mother was constantly worried about money, Randall said that his mother stressed the importance of higher education for upward social mobility. Randall said he related to the Carlton Banks character on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. He said that both white people and people of color have told him that he is trying to act white because of how he talks and dresses.

**Reggie** is a 20-year-old junior. He grew up in a majority-Latino suburb of Los Angeles. Reggie is an African-American studies major. Reggie attended a majority-Black performing arts charter high school in the Leimert Park area of Los Angeles. He was originally placed on the waitlist for WCU. Ultimately, he was encouraged to continue pursuing WCU by his family and his mentors at a college prep organization that attended. He is a huge fan of past Black media and as a hip-hop artist regularly samples old records and snippets from Black movies in his music. He plans to pursue a graduate degree and regularly presents his research at academic conferences that feature undergraduate student scholarship.

**Renee** is a 21-years-old junior. She racially identifies as Black. She is double majoring in rhetoric and interdisciplinary studies. She is from a suburb located about 40 miles east of Los Angeles. Her career goal is to become an attorney. She resides in an on-campus dormitory. She

grew up with both her mother and father in the home, along with her brothers. Renee is also very active in campus affairs, including helping incoming freshmen with their transition to WCU.

**Robin** is a 21-years-old junior. She racially identifies as Black. She is double majoring in African-American studies and anthropology. She grew up in South Central Los Angeles. Her parents migrated to the United States from Nigeria in the 1970s. While her parents were not fans of much Black television, they encouraged her to watch *The Cosby Show* because they believed that the show promoted strong family values. She stated that she often had to reconcile the disconnect between the values espoused in her home with those she encountered in her neighborhood and amongst her friends. She also described becoming more politically conscious as she encountered other Black students at WCU.

**Stephanie** is an 18-year-old freshman. She racially identifies as half-Nigerian and half-Indonesian. She is a pre-business major. She grew up in a working-class suburb 60 miles east of Los Angeles with her mother, father, and three older brothers. She was often the only Black student in most of her classes in high school. Stephanie describes being more sensitive about issues related to race during her first year at WCU. She detailed experiences with microaggressions and the mental work it takes to discern whether an encounter was racist.

**Taj** is a 20-year-old sophomore. She identifies as African-American. She is an African-American Studies major. She identifies as gender queer. She grew up in a working-class suburb in Northern California that describes as “ghetto adjacent.” She attended middle-school in an affluent suburb thirty minutes away. She attended an arts high school in the downtown of a major city thirty minutes from her home. She is the first person in her family to attend college and was raised by her mother and grandmother.

**Todd** is a 21-year-old junior. He racially identifies as African-American. He is a sociology major. While Todd lived in a slightly more affluent suburb of Oakland, California. He attended high school at an inner-city Oakland high school with hopes of competing on their successful football team. Todd later decided to quit football and instead focused on his academics. Growing in a home with his mother and father, Todd described how his high school classmates endured poverty and food insecurity, which he understood as a contrast to the stability he experienced in his more middle-class household. His career goal is to become an attorney.

**Tonya** is a 21-year-old senior. She is a double majoring in psychology and molecular environmental biology. She racially identifies as Black and from a suburb 10 miles east of San Francisco. Most of her favorite television shows are from the 1990s and cites them as having a profound impact on her racial identity and career aspirations. She credited her mother as being instrumental in cultivating her affinity for 1990s Black sitcoms. She discussed the importance of maintaining a strong network of Black friends as a means to combat the systemic racism she experiences at WCU.

## Chapter 4: Dreamchasin' (It Was All a Dream)

In this chapter, I explore the imaginative strategies participants learn from 1990s Black television. Specifically, I will focus on data centered on how the programs shape participants' ideas about social mobility. Situating television consumption as an everyday learning practice, Fisherkeller (1995) argues that the medium provides young people with materials for imagining "their particular version of the American Dream, in which they will be successful professionals, and live 'better', either economically or politically" (p. 261). Such strategies are imaginative because "they are symbolic links connecting who the students are, their possible selves, and the circumstances of the particular adult worlds into which they want to move" (p. 251). Fisherkeller (1997) posits that adolescents and young adults develop their aspirations and goals through their encounters with people and situations in the local cultures of the schools, families, neighborhoods, and friend networks. However, she argues that television culture provides young viewers with strategies for imagining the fulfillment of these same aspirations.

Considering how local and television cultures can work in concert, Fisherkeller asks, "While strategies from television culture might help young people imagine their futures, could television strategies actually help them accomplish their dreams?" (p. 488). In this chapter I argue that by sampling imaginative strategies from shows such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Martin*, *Mo'Nique*, and *Living Single*, participants acquire "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers", "a culture of possibility" that allows participants to imagine their future selves (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

First, I will look at how social mobility through the myth of the American Dream functions as a dominant theme in 1990s Black situation comedies and how participants identify this theme in the programs generally. In this sense, the American Dream is understood as a narrative that binds Americans through specific themes and assumptions, chief among them is the promise that anyone can succeed in America. Second, I will examine how the aforementioned shows inform participants' educational, professional, and social aspirations. Finally, recognizing that participants occupy what Stuart Hall (2000) describes as a negotiated reading position, neither fully accepting nor rejecting the dominant themes encoded in the shows, I will examine how participants trouble critics' impression that the shows only advance narratives of unobstructed ascent. Participants highlight the fullness and limitations of 1990s Black situation comedies as pedagogical texts by identifying the episodes, scenes, and moments that highlight the challenges accompanying upward social mobility. In the next section, I will look at how social mobility and the myth of the American Dream function as central elements in many of the most popular 1990s Black situation comedies.

### **The Black Situation Comedy and The American Dream**

Participants are able to sample imaginative strategies from 1990s Black television because social mobility is a dominant theme in television from that era. Replete with imagery of Black educational and professional ascent, much of 1990s Black television constructed a United States where the American Dream was accessible to all its citizens. The America of the 1990s situation-comedy was one where faith, hard work, and ingenuity all but guaranteed that one could improve their lot in life. This ideology undergirded *The Cosby Show*, which Innis and Feagin (1995) assert, left viewers with the impression that the Huxtable family, and by extension Black people as a whole, would continue the upward mobility achieved by previous generations

of Black people. *The Cosby Show*'s popularity can be attributed to its commitment to presenting a world where race is not an impediment to social mobility. As Patricia Turner contends:

The most successful shows depicting the African American experience in America are shows like *Cosby* that reaffirm the American dream and hardcore middle-class values, where [if] you work hard you are rewarded with good-looking children, good-looking wives, nice cars, nice households. And that image is the one that is perpetuated. Anything that digresses from that norm is suspect and will probably not be granted tenure on primetime television (Riggs, 1991)

*The Cosby Show* serves as the progenitor for how many of the most popular 1990s Black situation comedies approached the intersection of race and class. And like *The Cosby Show*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Living Single*, and *Moesha* presented “an ostensibly egalitarian, post-civil rights, ‘post-racial’ world” that simultaneously assuaged white concerns about race and class while offering Black viewers a tutorial on how they, like the faces they saw on-screen, could acquire a piece of the American Dream (Haggins, 1999, p. 30). Haggins’ use of post-racial is particularly instructive, gesturing to the ways that 1990s Black sitcoms advanced the notion that race and racism were issues from a previous era that had been resolved in American society<sup>3</sup>. This is different from Leonardo’s (2013) use of “post-race,” where he argues that current social arrangements create a feeling of “race ambivalence” and the slackening of traditional race assumptions. The programs’ ability to appeal to a broad range of audiences ensured that they reached the requisite number of episodes to live on in syndication and thus available for sampling by subsequent generations of viewers. Haggins (1999) argues, it is through reruns that the American Dream “is refurbished for the contemporary spectator” and is codified through repetition (p. 33).

Todd, a 21-year-old sociology major, recognizes that 1990s Black situation comedies’ representations of universal situations, themes, and concerns resonate with audiences across racial lines. He says,

**Todd:** You still had the themes of family values, the themes of respect, parenting, education, sacrifice. It was a lot of common themes, looking back now you can kind of relate to those themes. Going to college. Striving to be successful. Independence. You see those back then.

**PJ:** Do you think those themes are important?

**Todd:** It helps people relate to them. A lot of those shows were highly popular, not just among Black America but among America in general. They are really popular. They make the shows really interesting. It helps people resonate with the show. If you can't really resonate with it, you probably don't want to watch it you don't care much about it. I can resonate with wanting to go to college. I can

---

<sup>3</sup> Here Haggins also echoes some of the arguments Bell (1989) presents in *After We're Gone: Prudent Speculations on America in a Post-Racial Epoch*. Bell writes, “The very visible social and economic progress made by some African Americans can no longer obscure the increasingly dismal demographics that reflect the status of most of those whose forebears in this country were slaves” (p. 393). Acham (2013) has also described *The Cosby Show* as Bill Cosby’s “fantasy of post-racial harmony that...dominated the Nielson ratings for years” (p. 110).



resonate with parents sacrificing to raise their children and to send them off to college and get them to be independent. I can resonate with that stuff.

Todd's observations reflect an understanding of how 1990s Black situation comedies often subscribed to what Gray (1995) describes as "separate but equal discourses" by "situat[ing] Black characters in domestically centered Black worlds and circumstances that essentially parallel those of whites" (p. 87). In doing so, the programs "maintain a commitment to the universal acceptance into the transparent 'normative' middle class" (p. 87), while also challenging the chains of equivalence that equate Blackness with poverty (Hunt, 2005). In the process, the programs reinforced the impression that Black people in the 1990s had access to educational, professional, and social opportunities that previously eluded them, an idea that while overly simplistic, is historically accurate. Pointing to the representation of social mobility in *Moesha*, Taj, a 20-year-old junior majoring in African-American studies, acknowledges the purchase of linking racial progress with Black people's increased professional opportunities, particularly for white audiences:

I feel like there is a certain idea of social mobility embedded in the shows or some type of homage to the Black middle-class and acknowledging that they exist and that they have their lives and they're living. I think that's really the branding of these shows. We're not content with our position as a lower-status class and we're working towards that the best we know how. Like in *Moesha*, [her father, Frank] sold cars and [her step-mother, Dee] was the principal. 'Oh, that's a nice Black middle-class family. *That's a decent life for a lot of white people. It just makes white audiences feel like that's good racial progress* [italics added]. Like Martin, he's the radio personality, you know Black people couldn't have those positions in the 1940s, so that's good for Black people.

Focusing on *Moesha*'s narrative, Taj explains how the show's cross-racial appeal is predicated on affirming, rather than challenging, the idea that the America Dream is accessible for all. *Moesha* and *Martin* reinforced the commonsense notion that by the mid-1990s race relations in the United States had progressed to the point where there were few substantive differences between the life chances of Blacks and whites. As a car salesman and a high school principal, *Moesha*'s Dee and Frank Mitchell represented a path to upward social mobility that was more accessible than the one presented on *The Cosby Show*, which could be achieved through higher education and an entrepreneurial spirit.

The increased opportunities for Black actors in the television industry during the 1990s also suggested that talent and a strong work ethic was all that was necessary for Black Americans to achieve social mobility. Gray (1989) writes, "Successful blacks who populate primetime television are charming, unique, and attractive individuals who, we assume reached their stations in life through hard work, skill, talent, discipline, and determination," confirming "the American value of individual success and mobility" (p. 382). For Black viewers, the higher number of Black bodies in 1990s television proved inspirational for those needing the source material to imagine a better life for themselves:

**Lorenzo:** [The 1990s] was a time when Black folks had just gotten their foothold in the television industry. They had just begun to get their own

television shows with their own names on [them]. I feel like it did play a big role in the Black community. It put out the image that you can obtain that as a Black person.

The presence of eponymous Black situation comedies in the 1990s like *Martin*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *The Jamie Foxx* advanced a perception that Black actors wielded considerable creative control over the shows that boasted their names. For Black viewers, the actors' success in the white-dominated field of primetime television is evidence that social mobility is possible for all Black people. In the next section, I explore how participants enact the imaginative strategies they acquire from 1990s Black situation comedies to help imagine future versions of themselves, educationally, professionally, and socially.

### **Educational Strategies**

Black television in 1990s placed particular emphasis on featuring college-educated Black people, reinforcing a long-held belief in the African-American community that obtaining a college degree is key to combating systemic racism en route to achieving the American Dream. Black scholars and cultural critics often point to the popularity of *The Cosby Show* and its university-based spin-off series, *A Different World*, as contributing to a spike in Black college enrollment during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (aka HBCUs) (Adelson, 1991; Alterman, 1989; Whatley Matabane & Merritt, 2014). Reflecting on her experience watching *A Different World* as an adolescent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Colorado College English professor Heidi Lewis (2014), credits the show for helping her imagine herself as a college student and ultimately a college professor. For Lewis, *A Different World* provided “young Blacks like myself a glimpse into college dormitories, cafeterias, and classrooms...I saw Black professors for the first time. I believed I could be a doctor” (p. 65). The shows were often recruited into a broader discourse in 1990s Black popular culture that constructed the university as one of the sites where Black youth could gain a deeper understanding of their racial identities while also acquiring the preparation necessary to embark on a well-paying job and ultimately leading to economic stability<sup>4</sup>. Participants sampled the pro-college ethos of 1990s Black situation comedies to help not only imagine themselves as college students but also to gain some understanding of what was required to achieve such an identity.

For Tonya, not only did the shows provide images of college life to which she could aspire but they also provided points of comparison as her life started to resemble closely the life of the characters she admired:

---

<sup>4</sup> Hip-hop producer Ninth Wonder views the late 1980s and 1990s as a time when being educated, particularly about one's connection to a recent Black past, was an idea that was valorized through the arts:

From the African Medallions, to the Malcolm X t-shirts, the African-American College Alliance shirts Martin Lawrence wore on *Def Comedy Jam*, to *School Daze*, to the most powerful hour in black TV, *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*.

It really felt good to kind of be at the same level as some of the characters I liked. I remember *A Different World*, like ‘Oh, I’m in college like them now’. I always thought that was really cool. And just remembering *Moesha* and *Sister, Sister* and all of them started going to college, like I was part of that process too. It was really real. I always knew I was going to college but it was like getting a glimpse of what that might be like for me from the shows. Even though I knew it wasn’t real, it was like ‘Oh, this could still happen’. [I was] just kind of paying attention to those college episodes. I thought it was really cool to just be in my own space now and look back at their experiences and compare them to mine.

Like Tonya, participants cited *A Different World* as a critical text for helping them see themselves in college. As the only network television show to focus on the lives of Black college students, *A Different World* is a stark contrast to the predominantly white images of university life, which typically appear in mainstream popular culture such as television shows like *Saved By The Bell: The College Years* (1993-1994), *Felicity* (1998-2002), and *Blue Mountain State* (2010-2011) and films like *Animal House* (1978), *Old School* (2003), and *Neighbors* (2014). As one participant puts it, *A Different World* “showed a lot of elements of what Black colleges were like to television [audiences] and what they could be like. Everyone wanted to go to that college when they were young.” While *A Different World* focuses on the experiences of Black students at an HBCU, participants found the show useful source material for understanding their experiences at a PWI because as one participant puts it,

Even though we don't go to a HBCU, we're still black students pursuing higher education in [a] context where we're not supposed to pursue higher education...Even though we're at a PWI [Predominantly White Institution] and we're hella low in numbers, but that TV show just helps capture the world that we kind of exist in and the struggles we have.

As the above quotation illustrates, *A Different World* had considerable resonance for Black college students who were trying to make sense of their new identity, seeking to understand the circumstances of the new world they were about to join. While participating in a pre-college summer enrichment program, Taj turned to *A Different World* to help ease her transition into WCU. In the TV show, Hillman students’ attempts at balancing their social lives with their academic responsibilities served as cautionary tales while offering guidance on navigating campus life that was unavailable to Taj from other sources:

I remember every day I would have to take an hour nap and I would watch *A Different World*. I would just go on YouTube and watch different episodes. And that was cool because this is the world I’m about to embark in and *it is a different world* [italics added]. My family can’t really relate when I’m saying I have 20-page papers due. ‘Oh, baby you got it.’ I’m like, ‘No I don’t.’ You don’t understand. It was cool because on *A Different World*, niggas were really not going to graduate on that TV show. It was good to see what mistakes they made fooling around too much. That was a note to me, maybe you shouldn’t do too much.

Here, Taj's sampling can be thought of as rupturing what Lakoff (1990) refers to as the "grooves of academe", the tempo and rhythm of academic knowledge. With undergraduates occupying the lowest rung in the academic hierarchy, the information they need in order to navigate successfully the university often goes unspoken, with the implicit expectation that students possess such knowledge upon entering the university or that they will acquire it on their own. For Lakoff, this "heartless" process often contributes to a large research university being "a cheerless and frightening place for an undergraduate" (p. 152). While Lakoff describes the process as emblematic of the undergraduate students' experiences broadly, the feelings of fear and isolation are particularly pronounced for first-generation, Black students like Taj who are trying to understand how they fit at PWIs. The meaning of *A Different World* for Taj confirms Spence's (2005) observation that participants turned to soap opera shows for respite in "a world that does not always meet our needs; the flickering iridescence of the television can be an active site in which our dreams impinge on the isolation and fragmentation of our daily life" (p. 171). For Taj, *A Different World* supplemented the encouragement she received from family members, who, while well-intentioned, were unable to "feel her," that is, relate with her, on the challenges of academia.

Just as 1990s Black situation comedies framed earning a degree from a four-year university as the clearest path to social mobility, they also helped reproduce a hierarchy about the kind of school people should attend if they want to get the best credential and ensure future financial and social success. As Christopher expresses,

We can go back to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, kind of like how Carlton was going to [a four-year] college, whereas Will was going to a junior college.<sup>5</sup> [You could see] how they looked down upon that a little bit. [That] kind of made me look down upon junior colleges. People going to junior college, I always thought that was bad until I found out why people were going to junior college. [They go] because of money issues. Or they are going to stay home and work. And it's cheaper too. It's a lot cheaper. They are going to transfer because they have all these transfer programs. Because of the media, at first I was like, "Oh if you go to a JC that's terrible." I also thought the Ivy Leagues were the best ever. And then when they portrayed HBCUs, it always seemed like a party school. It was a whole bunch of Black people having fun all the time. That also made me question, "Oh I don't want to go to a party school." It wasn't until later when I started doing my own research that I started to find out what schools were really about.

Unlike *A Different World*, *Fresh Prince* advanced the idea that graduating from a PWI, particularly an Ivy League school, is the best way for Black people to better their lives. Christopher's quote suggests that the shows like *Fresh Prince* may have contributed to his decision to attend WCU, a public university with a reputation on par with Ivy League institutions. With the exception of the *Moesha*-spinoff, *The Parkers*, which focused on the experiences of a mother and daughter attending Santa Monica Community College, discussions

---

<sup>5</sup> Carlton's dream was to attend Princeton University like his father. However, Princeton rejected his application after he left a poor impression on an admissions officer, attempting to act more like a stereotypical "homeboy". Carlton joined Will at fictional ULA which had the feel of a commuter school and based off what the audience can infer about Will's high school academic record, was not particularly selective.

about college in 1990s sitcoms centered around four-year-universities. The sitcoms often failed to highlight how the lack of financial resources often thwarts Black students' dreams of attending a four-year university, which Christopher understood by talking with classmates who chose to attend junior colleges.

### **Social Strategies**

One of the promises inherent in 1990s Black television is the belief that a college degree leads to a well-paying career and the ability to enjoy the spoils associated with an upper middle-class lifestyle. Haggins (1999) argues that shows like *Living Single*, which focus on the work and love stories of young Black urban professionals, function as “colorized fables of social instruction” that call for a “commitment to a decidedly middle-class pursuit of happiness” (p. 34). *Living Single*, and to a lesser extent *Martin*, belongs in the category of 1990s film and television reflecting the sensibilities of a then emerging segment of the Black middle-class: college-educated, childless, never married, Black professionals who either lived alone or cohabitated with their romantic partner. Inspired by the 1997 film of the same name, Dickson and Marsh (2008) dubbed this demographic, the *Love Jones* cohort. Cultural production highlighting the *Love Jones* cohort advanced what Mask (2001) describes as a “politics of ‘Making It’ in America,” a pursuit of the Dream predicated on “getting good jobs, marrying reliable mates, sexing buff bodies” and ultimately, “tasting the sweet life” (p. 41). As some of the primary media focusing on the lives of Black young adults in their twenties, 1990s Black situation comedies were critical texts for participants to imagine their post-college work and social lives.

Pursuing careers with high levels of occupational prestige was integral to participants' visions of their post-college lives. Representations of Black women in such occupations had particular resonance for female participants in the study, contributing to an optimism that they could follow by tracing their favorite characters' footsteps. Tonya declares that reruns of *Living Single* project “a picture of success” for her. While participants were inspired by characters who were established in their careers, like *Living Single*'s Khadijah James and Maxine Shaw, they had strong affinities for younger characters who aspired to similar success:

**PJ:** If you could think of a TV show character that you relate to, who would that be?

**Marisa:** I kind of like Moesha, Brandy's character. She's really driven and she cares about her friends and family...I also didn't feel like I got to see a lot of other Black women on TV that were around my own age when I was a lot younger, so when I first saw that show, that was refreshing to me.

In this example, Marisa's statement about television's lack of young ambitious Black female protagonists confirms Mask's observation that “were it not for sitcoms like *Living Single* and *Moesha* –or films like *The Wood* and *The Best Man* –a large group of young folks are completely written out of the (sub)urbanworlds depicted in *American Beauty*, *Dawson*, *Buffy*, *Friends*, and *Felicity*” (p. 45). In programs like *Moesha* and *Living Single*, Black participants found characters whose drives, work ethic, and professional ambitions matched their own:

**Taj:** I fucking loved *Moesha* because Moesha wanted to be the journalist and she wanted to work for *Vibe* [magazine]. I was like ‘Oh my god that's what I want to

do.' I wanted to be Moesha...[1990s Black TV] just did a really good job of setting up scenarios we could plug ourselves into.

Like Tonya and Marisa, Taj describes an intimacy with her favorite characters, which speaks to television's ability to "reduce the distance between itself and its viewers, weaving a space/time continuum" in which viewers and characters "share a common universe of experience" (Corcoran, 1984, p. 137). When asked how 1990s Black television influenced his professional aspirations, Jason, a 23-year-old art history major, stated that shows helped him see himself as a young professional:

Maybe made it a little easier to see myself in a more respected position...I would like to be a professor and I intend to do my Ph.D. I guess it's kind of allowed me to visualize, as weird as it is, if I see another Black person and they're on TV. Like the physical act of being on TV. Even Bill Cosby's character, he's a doctor it made me feel like I can definitely be a professor.

Echoing Taj's earlier observation that 1990s Black television offered representations of Black people in professions that whites also coveted, Jason admitted such representations contributed to him subscribing to what he deems as "white standards" of success.

Along with respect, participants also coveted the autonomy and financial independence that characters enjoyed through their professions. *Fresh Prince's* Phillip Banks inspired Caron to study law because

[Phillip] seemed to have a very easy lifestyle. You saw him in the house quite a lot. He had a great lifestyle. His kids were a bit spoiled but other than that he didn't seem to work too hard. And he had loads of money and he seemed to, sometimes, be connected to the Black community. He made it look easy.

Despite being an attorney at an esteemed law firm, most scenes and storylines involving Philip Banks took place in the family's Bel-Air mansion. Like his predecessors, *Cosby's* Dr. Cliff and Claire Huxtable, Banks is rarely seen practicing law. His professional success allows him to set his own schedule and be mostly housebound where he is able to attend to family issues. As a result, the pressure and stress associated with being an attorney were often invisible to young viewers like Caron, which leads to a certain romanticization of practicing law and only focuses on the pecuniary benefits of becoming a lawyer or the status associated with it. As evident in Caron's reference to the Banks' affluence, participants used the characters as examples of the kinds of material success to which they aspired. The Banks offer a model from which participants build their visions of the Dream, as illustrated in the following comment from Dennis:

I want that nice car that [Philip] has. I won't have the same occupation as he has but my goal right now is to achieve some of the things that he has. Those are the things I never really had growing up. I want to create that for myself. I want to have the pool in the backyard with the nice view. I want to have that two-story house that's big but not too big on the mansion side. At the same time have those two cars. I say like three cars. Like a family car, then the mother has a car and

you have a car. So y'all both go to work but you have a family car that you can take all of the kids. I really idolized that. Now a lot of the things I do in terms of seeing different types of families on TV, especially Black families, I want to recreate that mom and pop thing. I didn't really have a father growing up. My father was in jail most of my life. Seeing it on TV, I want that. I want to create that for my kids, so they don't have to go through the same things that I went through.

Returning to Fisherkeller's contention that television functions as a resource through which adolescents learn how to resolve social dilemmas, here Dennis describes how he utilizes the medium to envision a future family life that differs from his own upbringing. Dennis' desires for a nuclear family aligns with traditional televisual representations of Black middle-class life. Contrasting his past experiences, including an imprisoned father, with his image of a better future, Dennis believes that significant class mobility is possible within a single generation. For participants, 1990s Black television provided a space to imagine a future free of financial struggle. As evident in Dennis's passage, participants saw upward social mobility as tied to coupling with partners who had similar educational backgrounds and career aspirations.

Programs like *Living Single* and *Martin* offered some of the first television representations of urban, unmarried Black professionals. While this set of sit-com characters often referenced getting married and having children as eventual goals, they regularly celebrated the autonomy they enjoyed being single and childless. Participants aspired to similar freedom in their romantic relationships.

**Monica:** On *Martin*, they both worked. So [it gave me an] understanding [of] a young couple working [with] no kids. They [were] always having fun, always going places, always doing something, always taking trips, buying things for themselves. So me understanding, "Ok, that's the time in my life, I looked up to those shows and those characters, understanding that's what they did."

Here, Monica draws on *Martin* to envision a comfortable future wherein she has considerable disposable income. By partnering with someone of similar educational and socioeconomic status, Monica imagines a lifestyle where going on vacation or buying gifts does not produce financial strain. Echoing Monica's sentiments, Randall aspires to a relationship similar to Martin and Gina's, comparing their financial freedom to that of *Good Times*' James and Florida Evans:

Martin and Gina would actually go out places together. They would hang out in social environments together. They would hang out with friends together. They would invite people over. In *Good Times*, it was always some type of struggle. If they were hanging out it was always at home because they couldn't afford to go anyplace else.

The 1990s saw the rise of situation comedies focused on the lives of twenty-somethings, with the city, not suburbia, serving as the primary site where they pursued the Dream. With this shift emerged a new relationship between characters and their domestic spaces. Whereas Dennis and

Caron identified Phillip Banks' constant presence at home as signifying upper middle-class success, for Monica and Randall, Martin and Gina's professional achievement was signified by their ability to live a vibrant life outside their apartments. *Martin's* narratives often revolved around the couple going to nightclubs, attending concerts, and going on vacations with their friends. These two seemingly diametric tendencies work in concert with each other to create a contradictory, yet meaningful, narrative for participants about what they should expect as they grow older. Philip and Vivian Banks represent the desired destination for Martin and Gina, and other unmarried Black professionals, moving from cohabitation to marriage, from an apartment to a mansion, and from being childless to becoming parents.

For participants, 1990s Black situation comedies reinforced the value of tight-knit friend groups, by celebrating the "collective effort of those moving forward as a group, as family, striving together to seize a piece of the Dream" (Haggins, 1999, p. 34). Participants were particularly inspired by the relationships between *Living Single's* lead characters, hoping to share similar intimacy with their friends:

**Robin:** I used to wonder what would happen when I grew up and started living by myself. Would I have friends like this? Would it be like a community type of thing? Or is it going to be like a hi and bye type of thing?

Similarly, Tonya pointed to *Living Single* as providing the model for the kinds of relationships she hoped to enjoy as an adult. She states,

Watching *Living Single*, I tell some of my friends [that] we're going to move to New York and we're going to get a brownstone in Brooklyn. And that's going to be us. I tell them that all the time. I look forward to getting older and being a real grown adult woman, [a] Black woman and having grown adult Black woman friends.

Tonya and Robin's ability to imagine themselves having similar relationships with other Black women echoes some of the womanist resonances that Guerrero (2013) identifies in *Living Single*. Alice Walker (1983) describes womanist communities as consisting of women who "appreciate and prefer women's culture...and women's strength" and are "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (p. xi). Tuning to the womanist frequencies in *Living Single's* mix, participants highlight the value of tight-knit communities that stand in "for the larger societal support that most black women lack in both literal and ideological terms" (Walker, 1983, p. 184), with the "community of Black women friends" serving as "a surrogate family formation that assuages societal anxieties over the transgressive potential of the Black body" (Walker, 1983, p. 185). Participants draw direct comparisons with representations of Black women in dramatic programs featuring Black women in lead roles like *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, where the Black female protagonists have little contact with other Black women despite living in cities with large Black populations<sup>6</sup>. In contrast, Tonya prefers 1990s Black situation comedies because, "You got to see Black women have Black women best friends." Recognizing that upwardly mobile Black people often inhabit spaces where they are the

---

<sup>6</sup> *Scandal* is set in Washington, DC and *How to Get Away with Murder* is set in Philadelphia.



minority and subject to various forms of microaggressions, participants saw maintaining connections with other Black people as vital to their vision of “tasting the sweet life”.

### Reading the Breaks

Critics often chide 1990s Black situation comedies for depicting Black upward mobility absent of institutional and systemic obstacles or critiques of them (Acham, 2013; Beltran, 2007; Inniss & Feagin, 1995; Leonardo, 2013; Marriott, 2007; McKissack, 1997; Williams & Emani, 2014). Despite acknowledging 1990s Black situation comedies’ immense popularity among her undergraduate students, Beltran (2007) finds the programs to be problematic texts for examining non-white media representations in her media courses. She writes,

The 1990s programming that today's college students grew up on proves a complicated case in point. How to raise consciousness regarding patterns of representation that include the common invisibility and denigration of ethnic minorities, *as well as* the whitewashing of non-white histories and perspectives even while casting non-whites in more professional and “positive” roles? (para. 1)

For Beltran, the visibility of upper-middle-class African-Americans in 1990s network television obfuscates the percentage of Black people who were living in poverty at the time. For this reason, Beltran hesitates to label such programs as “Black,” arguing that “a lack of contextual framework within the narratives themselves” leave “these images mere positive caricatures, fantasies with fantasy storylines” (Beltran, 2007, para. 4).

As evident in participants’ affinity for the programs’ representations of Black professionals, Beltran’s concerns are warranted. However, her contention does not account for the competences that Black audiences bring when they watch such programming. Black audiences draw on their racialized experiences to fill in the gaps related to systemic racism that are often absent in the sitcom’s overt narratives. As Tonya expresses, characters in 1990s Black situation-comedies “didn’t really have to say I’m Black.” Instead, they were “just put in spaces and just let the Blackness be.” As a result, for Tonya the programs “read as Black no matter how you put it.” For Black viewers, the material realities of Blackness are ever present, even when viewing episodes that are not explicitly about race. Thus, it would be difficult to dismiss Black young adults’ ability to imagine their futures through the 1990s situation comedies as mere fantasy. Instead, the programs engender what Berlant (2009) terms as a cruel optimism, “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be...*too* possible” (p. 33, italics in original). As a result, participants sample 1990s Black television to foreshadow the potential challenges and dilemmas that await them as young black professionals as they tune in to how the programs advance “a collective autobiographical narrative about the traumas of integration in a post-civil rights era” (Zook, 2009, p. 15). Highlighting the forms of oppression and discrimination specific to their aspiration for upper middle-class status, participants develop tempered expectations for the future, reflecting their understanding of Black people’s tenuous access to the Dream.

Participants point to “very special episodes”, or what one participant dubs as “PSA episodes”, as explicitly addressing the racialized challenges associated upward mobility. The very special episode ruptures a situation comedy’s narrative flow by confronting a social issue and using an unexpected dramatic tone. Wilcox (1999) observes that television series often deploy the very special episode as a way to “claim redeeming social value by focusing episodes

on unmediated presentations of social topics such as AIDS or alcoholism” (p. 16). Griffin (2011) argues that very special episodes related to race often disrupt television’s “prosaic pleasures of Blackness” by emphasizing “the structural inequalities that are often occluded by racial difference’s representation for profit: workplace inequality, unequal access to legal protection, unfair treatment in consumer settings” (p. 245). For Griffin, the very special episode is akin to Doane’s (1990) conception of television’s treatments of catastrophes in that they are “moments which can be isolated from the fragmented flow of information, moments with an impact that disrupts the ordinary routine,” providing an “unexpected discontinuity in an otherwise continuous system” (p. 228).

Participants work with these breaks in the programs’ narratives to complicate their visions of the future and trouble the notion that Black people have unfettered access to The Dream. Within the discourse of hip-hop music production, the break is often understood as the moment in soul, funk, and disco records “where the melody disappears and is replaced by a rhythmic solo” (Weheliye, 2001, p. 310). Djs and producers repeat these breaks, either using two turntables and a mixer or a sampler, to create the foundation for a new musical composition. Like musical breaks, very special episodes are “points of rupture in their former contexts, points at which the thematic elements...are suspended and the underlying rhythms brought center stage” (Rose, 1994, p. 73-74). For Black audiences, these breaks suspend “what it feels like to live constantly exposed to racially organized and distributed vulnerability and risk” (Gray, 2013, p. 1110).

When referencing how 1990s Black situation comedies addressed the intersection of class and race, participants pointed to an episode from *Fresh Prince*’s first season, “Mistaken Identity”. The primary narrative for “Mistaken Identity,” which first aired on October 15, 1990, focuses on racial profiling and “driving while black. In the episode, Philip and Vivian plan to spend the weekend in Palm Springs with Philip’s white law partner Henry Furth and his wife, Margaret. The Furths ask Carlton and Will to drive their Mercedes to Palm Springs. On the way, a police officer pulls over Will and Carlton, suspecting that they stole the car. While the boys are detained, Vivian storms into the precinct and angrily demands the boys’ release. Rejecting Vivian’s demands, the deputy also dismisses Phillip’s attempts to explain calmly the officer’s error. Fed up with his family’s mistreatment, Philip launches a legal salvo at the officer:

When you got this alleged confession from these two young men did they have a lawyer present? No, because I’m their lawyer. Did you notify their parents? No, because we’re their parents. So, officer don’t tell us to wait. Don’t tell us to sit down. Open that damn cell and let those two boys out of there or I’m going to tie this place up in so much litigation that your grandchildren are going to need lawyers.

For Corey, “Mistaken Identity” represented one of the “moments when we could see the reality of life” through *Fresh Prince*. Corey was impressed by the Banks’ ability to speak back to law enforcement:

Aunt Viv and Uncle Phil came up there and basically shut it down. It was like, yes, that’s what I want to see. I want to see my black people shutting it down. No you will not wrongfully arrest my children. I know the law. I am a judge<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> Phillip Banks is appointed judge in later seasons.

The Banks' ability to "shut it down", in this case voice their displeasure with their children's incarceration, is enabled by the considerable social capital they possess as an attorney and professor, respectively. Corey's move from third to first person perspective signals a form of embodiment where he imagines himself taking up a subject position where he could offer similar resistance if he or his family members were falsely accused.

However, the episode also demonstrates the limitations of class privilege when it is associated with Black bodies. Being the children of Black professionals does not protect Carlton and Will from police mistreatment. The access they have to white spaces makes them ironically and uniquely vulnerable to state-sanctioned violence. As Du Cille (2001) observes, "Blackness is so deeply inscribed as low-Other in the dominant consciousness that, in the wrong place at the wrong time, the trappings of wealth and privilege—a luxury automobile, let's say—can get you killed" (p. 414). The officers' disbelief that Philip is Furth's law partner illustrates a form of exclusion from the middle-class that "encompass[es] the psychological devaluing and subjugation of the experiences, perspectives and knowledge" of Black professionals, "who have been positioned as undesirable 'others'" (Rollock, Vincent, Gillborn, & Ball, 2013, p. 270). For all of the Banks' threats, Will and Carlton are only released after Furth arrives and confirms that the car was not stolen. Whereas Corey felt emboldened by watching the Banks defend their children from law enforcement malfeasance, for Christopher the scene revealed some of the traumas associated with assimilation and upward ascent:

Carlton is portrayed as an individual who doesn't really know his Blackness. They always identify him as white and they have episodes where he's asking, 'am I Black and stuff like that. They were pulled over and Carlton was oblivious to the fact that they were pulled over because they were Black, driving a nice car at night in the wrong neighborhood. He didn't want to believe that. He asked his father towards the end of the episode, "If you saw a car driving slow wouldn't you stop it?" His father said, "I asked myself the same thing the first time I got pulled over." And [in] the jail scene, Carlton's father came in to get the kids out but it wasn't really [his father] that did it. It was the white friend who said 'Let em go'. [The officer] just let them all go because the white guy said it.

"Mistaken Identity" diverges from the situation comedy's penchant for resolution by closing with the exchange between Phillip and Carlton described above. The episode does not treat racial profiling as an isolated occurrence but instead gestures to the quotidian nature of police harassment in the lives of Black people, including those with the financial means and social status of a successful attorney or college professor. In this sense, the episode serves as a commentary on the potential perils of upward mobility for Black people, suggesting that Carlton's affluence failed to protect him from the pervasive nature of racism in the lives of most Black people<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> Bogle attributes Carlton's lack of awareness of racism to *Fresh Prince's* producers and writers' failure to account for the specificity of the Black middle-class experience:

Though some might believe the Black middle class simply imitated the values and attitudes of whites (partly true), the Black Bourgeoisie also had its own set of standards and values, its own set of references and priorities, which were distinct unto itself. In the early 1990s, these were people who indeed may have

Situation comedies like *Living Single* and *Martin* and films like *Strictly Business* (1991) and *Boomerang* (1992) constructed corporate America as a space that offered Black people great opportunities for upward mobility. As Taj puts it, tongue in cheek, “We’re like post-civil rights, post-1964. We got all of our rights. We can be in corporate America. We’re fucking with it.” Black professionals in these television programs and films were often warned to guard against compromising their integrity and sacrificing their racial sense of self in their attempts to advance within white corporate structures. George (1998) argues that just as Black Americans enjoyed the freedom to pursue professional opportunities after the civil-rights movement, which were previously denied to Black people, they also faced a unique challenge. He writes, “They were faced with a new conflict between maintaining loyalty to their generally white employers—protect that job!—and espousing a pro-black agenda that could endanger their jobs. Just because you’re in doesn’t mean you fit in” (p. 2). Black professional characters were charged with “the duty to ‘stay black,’ uplift poor blacks and promote black culture” (Farley, 1991, p. 1D).

The pressure associated with balancing these directives while working in a white corporate environment is central to the narrative of “A Hair-Razing Experience”, an episode from *Living Single*’s second season. In the episode, which first aired on December 8, 1994, Kyle meets with the partners of his financial management firm to propose leading the development of an African mutual fund. After anxiously waiting several days to hear the partners’ decision, Kyle approaches the only Black partner, Lawrence, to inquire about his proposal’s status. Lawrence informs Kyle that while the partners were impressed with his presentation, they do not believe his appearance projects the “right image” to lead such a high-profile account. Lawrence suggests that Kyle cut off his dreadlocks if he wants the promotion. After deliberating with his friends about his dilemma, Kyle decides to keep his dreadlocks and implores the partners to see his style as an asset:

---

wanted their children to attend top private schools; who themselves may have lobbied for an entrée to the ‘best’ social clubs, neighborhoods, and restaurants. Yet they did not necessarily want to be white. Nor did they—in their pursuit of the almighty American Dream—want to completely abandon African American culture and an African American middle-class lifestyle.

Traditionally, these were people who had their own social clubs, their own set of equally successful African American friends, their own rituals, their own hierarchy. All sorts of status symbols came into play, everything from hair texture to skin tone to the use of language. For decades, the Black Bourgeoisie also had its own top schools, not Harvard or Yale, but historically Black colleges like Morehouse, Howard, Lincoln, and Fisk. The Black middle class also prided itself on knowledge of its literature, be it the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, or Countee Cullen. Or its artists like Horace Pippin and Augusta Savage. Or its great concert hall performers like Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Paul Robeson. And the Black Bourgeoisie had a distinct social philosophy regarding the importance of all African Americans doing something to further the race, not hinder it. Acutely aware of racism, the Black Bourgeoisie adhered to W.E.B. Du Bois’s Talented Tenth theory, seeing themselves as leaders who had to set or preserve standards of the rest of the race (p. 388).

When I joined this firm about three years ago, I believed it to a place where someone advanced because of his or her ability. But I've come to realize that this firm values the superficial over the substantial. But I cannot violate my personal integrity. My hair is not just for fashion. It's part of my heritage, it is a statement of pride. A statement by the way that could show our clients that this firm is not only progressive when investing its money but also progressive when investing in its people.

The partners tell Kyle that they decided to give him the promotion and that it was Lawrence who had reservations about his hair. The episode ends with Lawrence telling Kyle he was only trying to help, to which Kyle replies, "The sad part is you actually believe that". Kyle emerges as the episode's hero pointing to the possibility that Black professionals can simultaneously advance within the corporate structure, remain connected to the plight of poor black people, and celebrate their commitment to Black cultural aesthetics. Lawrence serves as a cautionary tale about the lengths Black professionals may go to court the favor of their white co-workers, including undermining their Black co-workers. For Tonya, Kyle's decision to defend his hairstyle is indicative of how the characters on *Living Single* deftly navigate the challenges of being Black in all-White spaces:

I feel like all the characters were very unapologetic about their Blackness. They just seemed like very proud people. They found ways to be successful or stay conscious in some way to where they could operate in areas that weren't necessarily always Black. Kyle was very conscious about his Blackness and he operated as a Black man in a white partner firm. I think that really allowed him to be more successful as that business man in that firm.

Tonya's comments reveal her appreciation for the characters' willingness to engage in what Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent, and Ball (2011) describe as "authenticity signaling work," or identity performances that convey to other Black people that despite "playing the game(s)" necessary to survive in white spaces, "they have not been entirely subsumed" by whiteness as a dominant ideology and "hence forgotten their black roots and identity" (p. 1088). For Tonya, Kyle's success is not qualified exclusively by his ability to advance within the white corporate structure but also by his ability to resist distancing himself from Black people who were not experiencing "a similar shift in class location and associated tastes, interests, and pastimes" (Rollock, Vincent, Gillborn, & Ball, 2013, p. 265). Episodes like "A Hair-Razing Experience" reinforce the idea as emerging Black professionals, participants will be required to develop "a set of multiple consciousness as they move back and forth the class and race divides within social spheres." (Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent, & Ball, 2011, p. 1088)<sup>9</sup>.

As the programs are re-mediated through various platforms, episodes that explicitly connect Blackness to systemic and institutional violence can easily become lost in the archive, dwarfed by the sheer number of episodes necessary for a program to live on in syndication. However, that a program's very special episodes continue to remain popular among Black audiences, often shared and repeated via social media networks (a practice I will address in the next chapter), speaks to the resonance of the themes for current Black audiences.

---

<sup>9</sup> Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent, & Ball (2011) build on DuBois's concept of double consciousness to account for how the Black middle-class navigates race and class discrimination.

## Chapter 5: The Black Cult Classic

In an August 2016 interview with the New York City morning radio show, *The Breakfast Club*, rapper Joey BadA\$\$ discussed his role as a *Seinfeld*-obsessed hacker on the USA network drama, *Mr. Robot*. When asked if he shared his character's *Seinfeld* fandom, BadA\$\$ replied, "Being a young Black kid growing up that just wasn't my sitcom of choice...We was [sic] too busy watching *Cosby Show*, *Martin*, *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*". Participants echoed Joey BadA\$\$'s contention that, for Black millennials, shows like *Martin*, *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *The Cosby Show* comprise "a popular canon, created outside the bounds of institutions officially sanctioned as granters of textual value (such as academe)" (Klinger, 2006, p. 143-144). As Edgar and Sedgwick (1999) note, canonical works "may indeed be taken as the expression of a culture's or nation's identity" (p. 52). For participants, an affinity for and knowledge about the 1990s Black sitcoms referenced in this study, were overwhelmingly treated as normative for most millennials.

In this chapter, I focus on data that highlights how participants experience their affinity for 1990s Black sitcoms as a form of collectivity that Mathijs and Sexton (2012) describe as "an impression, a feeling of feeling together, an impression of solidarity and sharing one's emotional attitude, and not necessarily one's material life (though it has effects in that material life)" (p. 20). I argue that participants position the sitcoms referenced in this study as *black cult classics*, highlighting how the programs "are invested with aspirations or claims to identity" and unite "members of the same generation around a common lifestyle" (Le Guern, 2004, p. 3-4). As self-professed '90s babies, participants were often nostalgic about watching the shows with their families when they were younger, viewing such practice as a constitutive part of their generational identity.

Overwhelmingly used to describe films ranging from *The Wiz* (ahoward6382, 2011) to *Sparkle* (Simioju, 2012; Tillery, 2012) to *Juice* (Williams, 2017) to *Menace to Society* (Evans, 2012) to *Belly* (Malcolm, 2008), *black cult classics* generally describe media texts for which Black people are imagined as the primary audience and with which Black audiences have intense affinities. Such work is often panned by popular white press, yet manages to "stay in the hearts and minds of viewers" (Evans, 2012), offering "tons of iconic quotes [and] life lessons" (VH1, 2015) while also conjuring up nostalgic recollections. By targeting Black audiences, the sitcoms referenced in this study fulfill one of the core tenets of cult media—they aim to draw a niche audience. Thus, one could argue that media targeting Black audiences is cult by design. While acknowledging the slipperiness of the term, Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson (2004) describe cult television as "any television program that is considered offbeat or edgy, that draws a niche audience, that has a nostalgic appeal, that is considered emblematic of a particular subculture, or that is considered hip" (p. ix). Each of the aforementioned criteria is applicable to 1990s Black sitcoms to varying degrees. Specifically, we can attribute the programs' longevity within Black cultural spaces to how the sitcoms serve as "figureheads" for the 1990s, thus imbuing long-term reception "with a sense of...nostalgia for a period (a zeitgeist or popular myth)" (Mathijs and Sexton, 2012, p. 17).

Based on the data, my findings reflect that participants' affinity for *black cult classic* diverges from how cult television and cult media fandom has been traditionally constructed by fan studies and television studies scholars. Wanzo (2013) points to the ability of Blackness to complicate fans studies' long-held framework of fandom as chosen otherness, noting that the field celebrates those "who have claimed otherness for themselves, as opposed to having

otherness thrust upon them” (para. 2.3). For Fiske (1992), the cultural economy of fandom includes a “culture of a self-selected fraction of the people” (p. 30). For Wanzo, this model “ignores the ways in which a fandom that is not a cult fandom can be considered somewhat normative” (para. 2.1). She argues that “African-American fans make hyper-visible the ways in which fandom is expected or demanded of some socially disadvantaged groups as a show of economic force or ideological combat” (para. 2.1). However, participants’ positioning of 1990s Black sitcoms as *black cult classics*, highlights how cult to some can also be normative for those who are othered. Or to put it another way, what does it mean that the *black cult classic*, while marginalized within the broader television landscape, is decidedly mainstream among Black people?

### ***Every Black Child Watched These Shows***

The notion that most Black millennials grew up watching 1990s Black sitcoms undergirds Raina’s assessment of the music video for rapper Big Sean’s song, *Play No Games*, which recreates scenes and aesthetics from *Martin*. The song, which features singers Chris Brown and Ty Dolla \$ign and samples R&B group Guy’s 1987 hit *Piece of My Love*, was the fifth single for Big Sean’s 2015 album *Dark Sky Paradise*. The music video takes place on a set that approximates Martin Payne’s apartment with the artists and actors wearing 1990s fashion. The video draws its plot from a storyline from “Beat It”, the fourth episode of *Martin*’s second season. In the episode, Martin invites a group of friends over to his apartment to watch a boxing match. However, Martin is unable to watch the fight because he is constantly attending to issues with his guests. When asked why Big Sean chose to sample *Martin* for the video, Raina replied:

I feel like it’s a way to address a certain audience. [He was thinking], ‘Oh people will recognize this’, from *Martin*. There is a song from [rapper] Wale, that came out a few months before and it samples *Seinfeld*. I think Big Sean picked *Martin* to reach the Black audience more because not everyone is going to recognize *Seinfeld*.

Here, Raina contrasts the effects of rappers Wale and Big Sean appropriating 1990s television in their music, while alluding to the imagined audiences for the aforementioned shows. According to Raina, Wale’s use of snippets from interviews with comedian Jerry Seinfeld on his *Album About Nothing* potentially alienates Black audiences because as she asserts, “Not everyone is going to recognize *Seinfeld*.”<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Raina reads Big Sean’s decision to recreate *Martin* as connecting with a broader audience. As she puts it, “Everyone has seen at least one episode of *Martin*.” Such comments may seem curious given that *Seinfeld* is one of the most watched television shows of all-time and is widely lauded as one of the most culturally significant situation comedies ever. Conversely, critics regularly panned *Martin* as formulaic, buffoonish, and offering one-dimensional representations of Black life. Raina’s comment reflects how the two sitcoms, which were programmed against each other on Thursday nights throughout the 1990s, were imagined as targeting two separate and relatively homogenous audiences. The chasm between the show’s

---

<sup>10</sup> Wale sampled dialogue from episodes of *Seinfeld* on his 2008 mixtape *Mixtape About Nothing* and his 2010 mixtape *More About Nothing*. The title of each song the mixtapes started with “the” an ode to how *Seinfeld* titled each of its episodes. Wale named his 2014 mixtape *Festivus*, after a fictional holiday popularized on *Seinfeld*.

audiences was addressed in a humorous scene from season one of FX's *American Crime Story: The People vs. O.J. Simpson*, which recreates the trial of former NFL football star O.J. Simpson for the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman. During the season's eighth episode, the jury has grown restless after spending the duration of the trial sequestered in a hotel. The scene opens with a deputy telling the jurors that they have received complaints about too much talking and laughing during movie nights. Next, another deputy informs the jurors that Blockbuster Video has sent over VHS tapes of new movies for them to watch. One of the Black jurors asks, "Did they send over *Martin*?" A middle-aged white woman requests an episode of *Seinfeld* to which an older Black woman asks, "What's a *Seinfeld*?"

As the jurors argue over *Seinfeld* and *Martin*'s respective merits, an older white male juror asserts himself as leader and proclaims, "Seinfeld is a much better show. We'll be watching Seinfeld." Rejecting the white man's assertion of power, the jurors vote between *Seinfeld* and *Martin*. The majority-Black jury chooses *Martin*, with most of the Black jurors voting for *Martin* and most of the white jurors voting for *Seinfeld*. The scene ends with the Black jurors celebrating by dancing and reciting one of the show's popular catchphrases, "You go girl!". This scene is juxtaposed with the next, which shows O.J. Simpson in jail playing poker with his white attorney and two white prison guards. The scene opens with Simpson telling his companions about the comedic genius of *Seinfeld* character Kosmo Kramer. The two scenes use media tastes to signal the disconnect between Simpson and working-class Black Angelinos, with Simpson's affinity for *Seinfeld* gesturing to alignment with white culture.

For Raina, Big Sean's decision to recreate *Martin* demonstrates an awareness of the segregated nature of sitcom audiences. Likewise, Elise imagines shows like *The Cosby Show*, *Martin*, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* as "staples" in the homes of Black people in her age range. She asks incredulously, "You didn't watch *Fresh Prince*? You didn't watch *The Cosby Show*? These are things as a Black child that you *should* have watched." Ultimately, Elise and Raina's comments reflect participants' beliefs that the 1990s Black sitcoms referenced in this study are programs that most Black people have an awareness of and an affinity for. As a result, the shows are understood as providing an "imagined linkage" between Black people across space and time (Anderson, 2006, p. 35).

The following exchange speaks to how participants understood watching 1990s Black sitcoms as a constitutive element of an imagined Black millennial childhood:

**Raina:** I think it's like they're just classic. [We] just keep watching them because it's like a sense of community and it's a part of culture to reference those shows.

You haven't seen them, 'What, are you really Black?'

**Patrick:** I want to hear more about that part. So, if you don't reference it, are you really Black? Why do you think that happens?

**Raina:** I think because it was popular back in the day among the Black community... Oh, you don't know about that. Where are you? What were you doing? It's like a widely-known thing in the community.

In asking "Where are you?," Raina suggests that those who are unaware of 1990s Black sitcoms are somehow alien, as her evocation of space suggests a distance between her and Black people who have not consumed the same texts. Like Raina, participants saw themselves extending the water cooler, lunch room, and school bus conversations they imagined Black people engaging in during the programs' initial network television runs. In this sense, participants gain a sense of



racial belonging by situating themselves as part of a Black cultural conversation that extends beyond the strict boundaries of space and time.

Participants frequently referred to 1990s Black sitcoms as classics, despite the fact that critics often panned the shows for what they perceived as a lack of artistic legitimacy, especially when compared to the era's more popular white-casted sitcoms. For the most part, 1990s Black sitcoms were not touted as lending "dignity and prestige to a genre typically dismissed as hopelessly banal" (Lentz, 2000, p. 48). Nor were the programs cited as being "more stylistically complex, and as offering more character development than most sitcoms" (Lentz, 2000, p. 48). With the exception of *The Cosby Show*, critics overwhelmingly described 1990s Black sitcoms as trite and formulaic. Hass (1998) writes, "Even the network executives who present them agree that virtually none of these shows are in the league of sophisticated, and all-white, sitcoms like *Seinfeld*, *Frasier*, or *Friends*" (p. 38). However, such assessments reveal the limitations of understanding a program's classic status as an intrinsic characteristic of the text absent of how it is positioned amongst fans and televisual institutions.

Garner (2016) contends that any appraisal of a media text's "classic status should be approached not as something residing 'within a text' but as a classification that arises discursively via reframing 'past' programs within the contemporary structure of the televisual field" (p. 142). In the following quote, Marisa speaks to how *Martin*'s continued circulation on Black television channels contributes to how she and her peers read the show as a classic:

**Marisa:** I kind of think becoming a classic doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be good, great, or profound. It just has to be remembered. [*Martin*] still plays on BET and that is really what defines it as a classic. Because it's still on TV multiple generations can still have access to it and multiple generations can relate to it. That's what makes it a classic. But as far as why it is remembered I don't know. Black representation is so limited if some representation of Black people sprout up at a time when there is very little, people are all going to look at it...Black people are like I can see someone who looks like me on TV. White people are like, "What is this?"

Marisa's reference to BET (Black Entertainment Television) airing *Martin* reruns harkens to Le Guern's (2004) contention that "the identity of a channel also functions as a constitutive element of cult phenomena and that a series may become 'cult' because it is associated with the image of a particular channel" (p. 18). Reruns of 1990s Black sitcoms regularly air on youth-oriented cable channels like BET, VH1, and MTV2, which rely heavily on hip-hop and Black culture for content. In the process, the "channels place themselves in opposition to mainstream culture by pioneering a youth identity" (Le Guern, 2004, p. 18). Television channels' willingness to show program reruns of 1990s sitcoms contributes to how participants read them as classics and thus worthy of being remembered.

### ***Cram to Understand: Sharing Intertextual and Intermedia competence***

Often championed as quality television, *Seinfeld*, *Frasier*, and *Friends* were a part of a cohort of 1990s network sitcoms aimed at attracting a niche audience of "affluent and upwardly mobile...sophisticated cosmopolitans" who networks assumed wanted "edgy, risqué programming with an ironic sensibility" (Becker, 2006, p. 186). As they live on in syndication, a "cult of irony" has developed around these "smart" television programs, which engenders an 'us

versus them mentality' among their audiences. Cult fans of the programs enjoy a "privileged position" as the shows' perceived "smartness" "assure viewers that they are superior to the average audience" who may not appreciate the shows' use of irony and understand their intertextual references (Mathjis and Sexton 2012, p. 230). Just as "smart" white shows require that their audiences are proficient in reading their multiple intertextual references, 1990s Black sitcoms require their audiences to be "smart" in their own way, developing and activating their ability not only to read the various references within the text but to exhibit a proficiency with the various paratexts that surround the shows as well.

Participants understand the sitcoms as Black beyond simply seeing Black bodies on the screen but through a set of intertextual and intermedia references. Such references rely on participants activating bodies of knowledge related to music, fashion, Black history, and other facets of Black popular culture. Participants imagine sharing these sets of competences with other Black viewers. Eco's (1994) observations about how cult film screenwriters advance the films' plots are useful for understanding why Black sitcoms require Black audiences to perform significant labor when reading the shows. He writes, "The scriptwriters put all the clichés of cinematic and narrative history into the film, turning it into a museum, so to speak, for moviegoers" (Eco, 1994, p. 127). Similarly, by trading on clichés of Blackness and leveraging a cadre of historical and contemporary Black cultural artifacts, Black sitcoms exploit the temporal affordances of the medium. As Uricchio (2010) writes, "Like a library or museum...television is a temporal aggregate, an accumulation of visions, tastes, and ideas gathered together into one place. Like a museum or library, television is a space of endlessly recombinatory artifacts" (p. 30). Participants demonstrated an ability to read the sitcoms in relationship to other media and popular culture from the time.

By putting 1990s Black sitcoms in conversation with 1990s Black film and music, participants conclude that the 1990s was a period when African-Americans' connection to Africa was widely celebrated in Black popular culture and media. Participants construct the era as a time when, as Tonya puts it, "Blackness was more Afrocentric, like roots and pan-Africanism. [Afrocentrism] was more considered the image of what it meant to be Black versus the gangster or the hustler or the prisoner or the crackhead." This sentiment is captured in the following exchange from one of the focus groups:

**Patrick:** Several participants I talked to described *Martin* as a classic, why do you think they would say that?

**Taj:** I think it's like a period piece. It's like the 90s...The aesthetic of *Martin*, how he has the kente cloth and the whole pan-African vibe going on.

**Robin:** I agree the style of clothing they're wearing. The hairstyles. From the point of view of now, the 1990s were the best, look at what was on TV.

The "pan-African vibe" that participants describe is attributed primarily to the characters' kente cloth and other African-inspired prints. While participants celebrated such styling, the use of "generic Pan-African symbols" as means of connecting the characters and by extension Black audiences to an imagined African heritage could be understood as a form of what Diawara (1999) describes as afro kitsch.

Through fashion, 1990s Black sitcoms evoke nostalgia for an imagined Africa, becoming "sites of temporary feel-good...that cover our wounds without healing them, or redeeming us"

(p. 177). In this sense, participants were attuned to what Zook identifies as the nationalist desire that both informed and was produced by Black sitcoms during the 1980s and 1990s. Zook (1995) describes such a desire as “a metaphor for displaced yearnings of belonging, family, community, home” (p. 6). Black sitcoms convey this desire, in part, through celebrating Black history and cultural aesthetics. Zook (1999) writes,

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 and nationalist desire. 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 black-owned publications like *Emerge*, *Ebony*, and *Essence* (p. 8).

Zook’s observations highlight how 1990s Black sitcoms are akin to museums in that they act as archives of disparate Black cultural objects. Participants ultimately feel a sense of racial belonging through their ability to recognize and appreciate the artifacts in the museum. However, the artifacts and the ideas that they embody are not simply encased in glass, only to be displayed. Pushing on the museum metaphor as it relates to cult cinema, Le Guern (2004) writes, “Whereas the museum presents objects removed from private appropriation and intended for appreciation at a distance, cultism entails intervention by the audience” (p. 10). Thus, the programs’ status as *black cult classics* is predicated on the ways that the references and artifacts packed in the shows resonate in participants’ everyday lives.

Participants credit 1990s sitcoms with teaching them about a black cultural canon, comprised specifically of Black literature, popular music, and style. Reggie points to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* as introducing him to Alex Haley’s classic, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*:

The first time I saw Malcolm X’s [auto]biography was on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. He was reading it. He had Malcolm X on his wall. All that for me was like, Malcolm X? Who’s that? He seems like someone I need to know about.

Reggie goes on to discuss how 1990s sitcoms “put him on to” seminal hip-hop artists. In the following excerpt, Reggie discusses how he sees his personal style reflected on *The Wayans Brothers* and how the sitcom influences his music tastes:

**Patrick:** What do you feel like you learned about 1996 by watching *The Wayans Brothers*?

**Reggie:** I think one thing, me as an artist I feel like I focus mostly on the culture. Even like the hair. Their hair is how my hair is, the way they wear their dreaded curled hair. The intro was A Tribe Called Quest’s *Electric Relaxation*. [Hums the melody] That’s where I first heard that beat. I was like damn this song is tight. Who is this? So that access to that culture that was great for me. They had people on TV who were popular at the time, the episode where they had Missy Elliot at the concert. They had her performing live on TV. Oh shit, that’s dope.

Reggie references how he developed an affinity for rap group A Tribe Called Quest's 1994 single *Electric Relaxation*, which served as *The Wayans Brothers'* opening theme music during the show's first two seasons. In both the Malcolm X example from *Fresh Prince* and the A Tribe Called Quest example, Reggie speaks to a process through which 1990s Black sitcoms were didactic, teaching him about a set of media texts that he felt he should know about. Like other participants, Reggie credited 1990s Black sitcoms with introducing him to various canonical Black texts of which he felt he should be aware.

As a hip-hop musician who produces sample-based music, Reggie likens the process of learning about Black culture through sitcoms to the process of tracing the influences of his favorite musicians. In the following excerpt, Reggie describes how his affinity for sample-based rapper and producer Kanye West led him to inquiring about other Black musicians:

Sampling has broadened my mind to Black culture. When I started making beats, Kanye West was popular. I was like what is he sampling? [I started] hearing all of these black artists. [I was] also hearing some of them from my family. I hear like that's Kanye's sample. From that who is he influenced by? Who is Pete Rock? Who is J Dilla? Who is that? Who is A Tribe Called Quest? Who produced A Tribe Called Quest? Who is No I.D.? Who is Jay-Z? Who is that? That cultural landscape was provided through music.

Here, Reggie describes how Kanye West was a gateway for him learning about other hip-hop artists with similar sensibilities. Such labor, whether it be related to a musician or television show, deepens one's affective relationship to their fan object. For Espenson (2010), a show's cult status is often dependent on a small but loyal audience's ability to understand references that may elude more mainstream viewers. She writes,

If you force viewers to participate in order to mine the most enjoyment, they will become the cult you're looking for. If a show takes a little more attention, a little more work, or thought, then they know that not everyone is going to 'get' it. And they'll feel proud that they are among a select few. That exclusive club—that's the 'cult' in cult TV (p. 45).

Through their understanding and appreciation of the various references and artifacts included in 1990s Black sitcoms, participants feel connected to each other. It is important to note that the intertextual and intermedia competences participants bring to watching the sitcoms were learned over time. Their ability to "get" the shows, requires engaging various forms of knowledge. In the next section, I will look at how the shows are passed down from one generation to the next functioning as familial heirlooms for participants.

### **Black Cult Classics as a Micro-Familial Inheritance**

Rashad (T.I.): "In this house, we never discussed our problems, we just watched *Good Times*. It seemed like the answer to everything"  
- ATL

The epigraph for this section captures the intergenerational nature of Black consumption of past Black television and the often-unspoken familial bonds forged through such viewing. It comes from the 2006 coming-of-age film *ATL*, starring rapper Clifford “T.I.” Harris. The film focuses on Rashad Swan, a 17-year-old Atlanta high school senior, as he navigates family, friends, and the uncertainty triggered by his impending graduation. Similar to the Swan family, participants described watching 1990s Black sitcoms as an activity that they regularly engaged in with their families. In fact, most participants credited their parents and older siblings with introducing them to their favorite 1990s Black sitcoms. This acknowledgement of parental influence challenges traditional constructions of youth popular culture and media tastes, which are generally understood as operating in opposition to adults. For participants, 1990s Black sitcoms are a form of what Smith (2012) describes as *micro-familial inheritance* in that they are “comparable to...family heirloom[s]”, passed down from one generation to the next (p. 159). Smith’s observations about how English parents pass their Northern Soul music fandom to their children are productive for understanding how families influence participants’ 1990s Black sitcom fandom. Smith contends that the soul child, as he dubs them, “does not merely inherit a record collection but a cultural identity; he or she inherits passion for a scene, comprehension of scene participation and the ability to perform connoisseurship via parental reminiscences, parental example and passed-down commodities” (p. 159). In this section, I will look at how older family members provide participants with examples of 1990s Black sitcom fandom and explore the various motivations for bringing them into the fan community.

For most participants, their parents were the primary socializing agent related to their 1990s Black sitcom fandom. The familial influence contributes to the intensity of participants’ fandom because “the children cannot un-know such cultural practice and objects of fandom as introduced to them by the socializing agent that is the family” despite having the agency to “accept or reject continued engagement with” 1990s Black sitcoms “when they grow older” (Smith, 2012, p. 166). Todd describes staying up past his bed-time to watch reruns of *Martin* with his father:

I would stay up to one o’clock [in the morning] watching *Martin* with my dad and sisters. He would just be watching it, so we would watch it with him and it was just really funny to us. So, we continued to watch it.

Similarly, Randall remembers initially watching *Martin* during elementary and middle school and describes the show as

kind of a household show. My family enjoyed watching those TV shows. That’s honestly what kind of got me into *Good Times* and *Martin*. My mom was always watching those TV shows. It kind of just turned into a family affair.

Tonya credits her mother for cultivating her affinity for 1990s Black sitcoms:

My mom always had *Living Single* on. She even had a *Living Single* hat she used to wear all the time...It feels like [when it was] my turn to watch television as a kid we would sit down and watch *Sister, Sister* together. Or we would watch *Moesha* [and] *Martin* together. I was put on to shows like *Living Single* and *Martin* from my mom.

Tonya and Randall echo a sentiment that was pervasive throughout the study—1990s Black sitcoms were omnipresent in participants’ homes.

As Black cult classics, 1990s Black sitcoms were read intertextually through other Black television shows. Parents used the shows their children watched as a means to introduce them to sitcoms they enjoyed in their own youth. Marissa’s route to *Martin* began after first encountering actress Tisha Campbell in the ABC situation comedy, *My Wife and Kids*:

I started watching this show that just started coming on ABC Family for a couple of years, *My Wife and Kids*, and the wife is the girlfriend in *Martin*. So, my dad thought it would be cool to show me what she was doing when she was younger.

Here Marissa describes how her initial affinity for *My Wife and Kids* intersects with her father’s *Martin* fandom through actress Tisha Campbell, who plays a lead role in both series. In tracing Campbell’s trajectory as a television actress, Marissa’s father links *Martin* and *My Wife and Kids*, bridging their two fandoms. Their bonding occurs in the third space between their two fandoms, a connection mediated through Tisha Campbell. While for Marisa, Campbell was Janet Kyle on *My Wife and Kids*, for her father Campbell was forever Gina Waters from *Martin*. The repetitive nature of television helps create a particularly strong entanglement between actors and the characters they portray. As Pearson (2004) contends, “With cult television stars, the fictional figure overlaps the star’s general image, which makes it difficult for subsequent texts to refuse or add elements” (p. 62). By introducing Marisa to *Martin*, her father establishes that Tisha Campbell was once, and for some always will be, Gina Waters. In doing so, he helps his daughter develop a competence to engage in a larger Black cultural conversation.

Marisa takes pleasure in seeing how much her parents enjoy revisiting the show with her. She says,

It’s funny because my parents have seen all the episodes, so they wanted me to experience it too. I guess for them it was kind of like bringing something new to me but something they were already familiar with. It was just fun to see them having a good time remembering stuff.

Participants interpreted their parents’ motivations for introducing them to 1990s Black sitcoms beyond simply sharing texts that provided them pleasure. Parents steered participants toward 1990s Black sitcoms because they believed the shows from the era promoted positive representations of Black life. Otis asserts that despite his mother’s general indifference to Black television, she leaned on *The Cosby Show* to help supplement the values she taught him. “She liked the family dynamic that they showed. Especially being a single parent, she liked to show me things that showed strong family values.”

Similarly, Robin and Elise’s parents encouraged them to watch *The Cosby Show*. Both attributed their parents’ Nigerian immigrant identity as the source for their general disdain of Black American television. As Robin puts it, “Africans have their own definition of Black America whereas their mindset kind of mirrors that of people who are not Black.” In her view, her parents perceived that Black television shows promote negative images of Black people, which were incongruent with their Nigerian immigrant values. For Elise’s parents, *The Cosby Show* represented the kind of Black American experience they wanted for their family:

For them coming to America from Nigeria, that's what they understood as being Black in America, living in a two-parent household, being established. You should have some high achieving job, either medicine or law or business, live in a good house, decent neighborhood, good pay. That's what they understood as being Black in America. And I can see that now because for a lot of us kids, [we were told] be financially secure before you start a family. Those are the kind of morals that they saw on the show. "Well, okay this is how it is in America therefore I should teach my kids to do this, this, and this."

Here, it is clear that the values encoded in *The Cosby Show* resonated with Elise's parents and reverberated into the lives of their children. In saying "I can see that now," Elise reflects on how the ideas about Black economic mobility in *The Cosby Show* matched her parents' beliefs and how it shaped her educational decisions and career aspirations. For her parents, *The Cosby Show* reflected a Black identity they could support in the United States, which the show modeled for their children.

Participants stated that they often watched 1990s Black television with their siblings after-school. They add that their older siblings controlled the remote control and thus determined what everyone else watched. As Stephanie puts it, "I have three older brothers, so I just watched what they watched," with *Fresh Prince* being one of the staples of their after-school television watching. Similarly, Christopher notes that he acquired his television preferences by spending time with his older brothers. Specifically addressing the *Fresh Prince*, Christopher states, "If they would watch it on television, I would go in there and see what they're watching. Then I'd find out and if I liked an episode, I'm like 'Oh I want to watch another one.'" Similarly, Taj attributes her fandom to her sister:

My sister watched a lot of these shows. You had all these Black blocks of shows in the late 1990s. My sister watched those and I watched with her... That's how I came to like *Moesha* because my sister loved it.

Ultimately, family played a significant role in cultivating participants' television taste and helped socialize participants into a larger Black fan community around 1990s Black situation comedies. Similar to the process Padua (2017) describes around children inheriting their parents' music tastes, participants' 1990s Black sitcom fandom "represents a passing-of-the-torch to the next generation" of Black television fans (p. 106). While home was the initial site where participants were introduced to 1990s Black sitcoms, ultimately, they understood themselves as connected to a larger community around the texts through their interactions with their peers outside of the home.

### **Engaging TV Talk with Other Students**

While most participants acquired their fandom in their homes with their families, it is in their interactions with their peers that their fandom is maintained. Specifically, participants engage in various forms of fan talk. Fiske (1992) describes fan talk as "the generation and circulation of certain meanings of the object of fandom within a local community" (p. 38). Fiske argues that for fans face-to-face discussions about their fan object is one of their greatest sources of pleasure, noting that for some fans "their choice of their object of fandom was determined at

least as much by the oral community they wished to join as by any of its inherent characteristics.” (p. 38). Advancing the concept of TV talk, Gillespie contends that, “Common experiences of TV supply referents and contexts for talk which is explicitly or implicitly about identities and identity positions” (Gillespie, 2005, p. 25). Writing specifically about television’s role in youth social interactions, Gillespie writes,

For them it acts as a catalyst to talk, serves as a shared topical resource, supports congenial social relations which are neither intimate not entirely impersonal, provides palatable topics for such sociable interaction and, in sum, contributes to a shared culture among local youth (p. 58).

As participants imagined shows like *Martin*, *Mo’Nisha*, and *Living Single* as having a predominantly Black following, they believed that the racialized nuances of the shows were lost on non-Black viewers. As a result, participants construed shared affinities for 1990s Black sitcoms as easing their interactions with other Black students.

In the following excerpt, Randall describes his experiences attempting to discuss classic Black sitcoms with his white classmates:

Whenever I make some sort of joke about *Martin* or *Good Times* [with white peers] there are kind of like these looks like ‘What? What are you talking about?’ Or they will do kind of like this fake laugh and you kind of know that they don’t understand what’s happening. Overall, it’s kind of like the reaction like, ‘Wait what did you just say?’ Can you explain that, I actually don’t know that TV show. And I’ll try to elaborate...And they’re like ‘No’. Or I may mention Martin Lawrence, they may know who he is but they won’t necessarily know he was on the show *Martin*. The reaction tends to be very confused.

Randall’s experiences discussing classic Black television with other Black students stands in stark contrast to white students’ sense of the same shows. He states that when he references shows like *Martin* and *Living Single* with his Black peers they reply:

“Oh, yeah you also remember this episode” and we’ll kind of build on that conversation. It’s really nice to have those conversations. It just sort of establishes some sort of connection...They either laugh with me or they bring up another episode and we laugh about that that one too.

On a campus where Black students are grossly outnumbered, a familiarity with 1990s Black television provides a starting point for conversations with other Black students. For participants, 1990s Black sitcoms constitute water cooler television talk. Jermyn (2010) describes water-cooler television as indicative of the ways that the medium “can make itself widely felt outside ‘the box’ and outside our homes to become part of public life and debate, sometimes with lasting resonance” (p. 1). Such television “break[s] out of ‘the flow’ of television’s everyday stream of sounds and images to enter our cultural consciousness” (p. 1). Such conversations are undergirded by the assumption that the shows resonate similarly for those involved in the conversation, mediating attachments between them.



Talking about Black television with other Black students ruptures the daily grind of being a Black student and helps assuage the isolation they feel at West Coast University. As Marisa describes it,

It's nice to have something to talk about with other Black students because I feel like Black students here are so few and far between that you could come from such different backgrounds and come from such different majors and interests [yet] once you get to talking about TV we have something we can talk about besides that it kind of sucks to be a Black student [at WCU].

Discussions about television serve as a respite to the challenges of navigating the campus's sometimes hostile racial climate. As Elise describes, many of these conversations occur while students watch 1990s sitcoms within the sanctuary of their dorm rooms:

I have a TV in my room. It will be on and some people from the floor will watch *Fresh Prince* together. We will talk about it now too. Now that we're in college we can decipher, we will compare and contrast like this happened in *Fresh Prince* as opposed to what. Those are conversations that we are consistently having when the TV is on about the shows.

That participants view the shows in their dorm rooms, absent of non-Black students, demonstrates how they develop social counter-spaces around these texts where Black students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and affinities are valued. In contrast, they described feeling alienated in other spaces on campus. As one participant puts it, "I feel invisible to people because they are trying so hard not to see my Blackness, so they don't have to deal with it." Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solorzano (2009) surmise that students build community in social counterspaces by "cultivat[ing] students' sense of home and family, which bolsters their sense of belonging and nurtures their resilience" (p. 677). This affective connection is indicative in Elise's contention that through such conversations about 1990s Black sitcoms she feels

[a] sense of community. We understand. We get it. There is a sense of understanding, you don't really have to explain why you're watching the show. This is the *show*. You got to watch it, type of thing. The conversations we have, they're really engaging and really funny. They even turn into arguments sometimes but they're fun arguments. You're really picking each other's brains. I really like that.

The above excerpts reveal how Elise feels a sense of belonging through her affinity for 1990s Black sitcoms and captures how she feels to connected other Black students through the shared competences that they bring to the viewing the programs. Stating that "we understand" and noting that she does not have to explain her affinity for the shows to other Black students, Elise suggests that non-Black students may lack context regarding why she watches the shows or that the shows may resonate with them in ways that are incongruent with her own experiences. Her discussions about the shows are comfortable because they are absent of the emotional labor that many participants described as part of their experiences as Black students on WCU's campus.

The shows are part of Black cultural enclaves where participants do not have to justify their existence on campus or the validity of their cultural tastes. Such work is part of what Givens (2016) describes as the invisible tax that comes with being a Black student at a historically white institution. According to Givens, Black students at universities like WCU pay this tax,

Through the mental, physical, and emotional resources that they could allocate to initiatives that promote academic and extracurricular success, but instead utilize to merely survive as students in a racially hostile campus environment. The constant coping deployed by Black students, and the fatigue it often causes, are both endemic to the invisible tax. In other words, the invisible tax is comprised of both Black students' strategies of resistance and the eventual exhaustion they experience from their labor. This is a tax that is both self-imposed for survival purposes, and imposed upon them by an institutional climate that neglects their needs as students in a variety of ways. (p. 62)

Discussing 1990s Black sitcoms can be a resistance to the tax insofar as it provides some levity to participants' days. In the process, they use the "black popular culture they have in the back of their heads" and "create space where that knowledge becomes critical and functional" (Ashe, Anderson, Neal, Shockley, & Weheliye, 2007, p. 797). One way that participants make such knowledge function is by leveraging Black sitcoms as source material for engaging in play with other Black students.

Participants' ability to chop the programs into fragments that they rework in their interactions with each other highlights a key characteristic endemic to the programs' cult status. As Eco (1985) contends, "I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to unhinge it, to break it up or take it apart so that one then may remember only parts of it, regardless of their original relationship to the whole" (p. 4). Banter about 1990s Black sitcoms often includes participants acting out scenes and evoking characters and catchphrases. In the following excerpt, Monica describes how *Martin* is deployed in roasting sessions with her friends:

Sometimes I will imitate something that Shenehneh might say. It's common. Me and my friends will use things that we saw on the show and stuff like that in our daily lives. Like 'Bye Felecia' from *Friday*. We use *Precious* all the time. Or 'Eat the chicken.' You know how you use comments in daily life. Specifically, from *Martin* when Shenehneh would be like, it was Gina, Pam, and Shenehneh they were in the hallway. Every time we get in an argument we be like 'I need you to move over there, so I can get over here alriiight! I said I need you to move over here, so I can get over there.' 'Oh, my gosh your breath.' 'I think you need an enema' We just say stuff like that.

Monica illustrates how scenes from 1990s Black television shows casually emerge in her conversations with her friends. When she says, "you know how you use comments in daily life," her references to characters, scenes, and catchphrases from Black television and film construct them as a normal part of daily conversations. Monica locates the scene from *Martin* among a cadre of references from Black films and television shows that she can deploy in her interactions

with friends. Impersonating Shenehneh, Monica engages in a performance that invites others to build on her utterances, layering their unique performances of the scenes atop hers.

However, such invitations work under the assumption that others know the scene and are able to reenact it. References to shows can emerge in conversations without warning. As Corey explains:

You almost have to remember the jokes or remember those kinds of moments. You might go out with some friends and all of a sudden, they will be bringing it up and you don't want to be the one guy out of the loop. That's happened to me and it's not fun.

Corey's assertion that lacking knowledge of the jokes from the shows illustrates how possessing such knowledge and having the ability to perform it maintains the flow of participants' social interactions. Here I draw on how flow is understood within hip-hop culture as "sustaining rhythmic motion, continuity, and circularity" (Rose, 1994, p. 39). We can think about Corey's gesture to the loop, and its relationship with flow, as similar to a hip-hop producer looping a drum break to create an instrumental. Many sample-based hip-hop records rely on looping a short drum break to provide a song's underlying structure, creating a sense of cohesion for consumers and artists. Retelling jokes and reenacting prominent scenes from 1990s Black television are examples of flow. Corey's statement illustrates how the conversational flow as well as the social cohesion it engenders, are ruptured when one member of the conversation is unaware of what they are expected to perform.

In addition to referencing shows in their face-to-face interactions, participants share their fandom via the Internet, providing yet another loop for participants to stay in and maintain. Part of the pleasure associated with their fandom relates to their ability to share material related to shows, such as episodes and memes, with other Black students online. This speaks to Gray's (2015) contention that "digital media technologies and platforms are crucial linkages and sites for registering...feelings—the invitation to like and share is not only about what things mean but also about how viewers feel about a given image, program, or story" (p. 1117). Sites like YouTube serve as archives for clips and episodes. Taj notes that because YouTube has full *Moesha* episodes, she and her friends engage in a "kind of informal sharing of episodes" with "people posting episodes on their Facebook [with messages like] 'This gave me life today', this one episode." Taj uses the colloquial expression '[t]his gave me life', to signify the episode's emotional resonance. Such proclamations open up the possibility for others to echo Taj's feelings and build on her initial post. Through her post, and the comments and resharing that follow, Taj can be understood as participating in a form of collective authorship, where she and her friends produce their own fantext around the show. Such labor is spurred by deep emotional resonance they experience and reflects the pervasive nature of what Stein (2015) terms a "feels" culture among millennials. Specifically focusing on millennial fan practices, Stein argues that through the Internet "the public celebration of emotion previously considered the realm of the private" has become normative" (p. 156). She continues, "In feels culture, emotions remain intimate but are no longer necessarily private; rather, they build a sense of an intimate collective, one that is bound together precisely by the processes of shared emotional authorship" (p. 156).

Participants' shared knowledge of the shows does not mean that they have the same orientation to the texts or that their relationship with the shows is always positive. While participants were generally celebratory in their comments about 1990s Black sitcoms, there were

elements of the shows that were disturbing to them. Participants were often critical of the representations of women in the study's two most popular sitcoms, *Martin* and *Fresh Prince*, which are arguably the seminal 1990s Black sitcoms. Despite their critiques of the shows, participants noted that they felt they had to contend with them due to their popularity among Black people. While participants feel connected to a larger community of Black people through the shows, they exhibited a plethora of affective investments in 1990s Black sitcoms ranging from joy to disdain to ambivalence. In the next chapter, I will focus on *Martin* and look at participants' ambivalence towards the show's promotion of anti-Black misogyny.

## Chapter 6: “Like Martin with No Gina”

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, participants find great utility in 1990s Black situation-comedies, as they interpret the texts to help them imagine future versions of themselves and construct an imagined Black community. However, participants also have vexed relationships with the programs. In this chapter, I look at evidence related to participants’ readings of the regressive gender politics advanced through the continued circulation of 1990s Black situation-comedies. Unlike previous chapters, which looked at participants’ responses across several 1990s Black situation-comedies, this chapter focuses on the most popular program among my study’s participants, *Martin*, a situation-comedy that originally aired from 1992 to 1997 on FOX and has been in syndication in the United States and abroad since 1994. *Martin* stars comedian Martin Lawrence as Martin Payne, a Detroit talk radio host. The show focuses primarily on Martin’s relationship with his girlfriend Gina Waters and secondarily his relationships with their friends Tommy Strawn, Cole Brown, and Pamela James. Each of the show’s five seasons is available on DVD and, at the time of this writing, *Martin* airs nightly on cable stations BET and MTV2. In addition, to television industry-sanctioned methods such as syndication and DVD sets, the show remains in circulation through fan-uploaded clips on sites such as YouTube and through GIFs and memes featuring *Martin* characters that are shared on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook.

While many participants cited *Martin* as their favorite 1990s situation comedy—with several proclaiming *Martin* their favorite show of all-time—they also described an ambivalent relationship with the show. *Martin*’s penchant for affirming and advancing stereotypes about Black women and the show’s troubling depictions of Black heterosexual romantic relationships contributed to participants having conflicted identifications with the show. Participants’ troubled affinities echo Wanzo’s (2013) contention that Black audiences’ reception of popular media texts is often informed by a “push/pull of love and dread” (para. 4.6). Wanzo contends that these strong affinities may not be attributed to assessments of quality as much as how the texts “fill a gap when there is an absence,” (para. 3.4) which in the case of my study’s participants relates to their desire for more media representations focusing on the lives of Black young adults. Thus, the dearth of such representations, particularly on network television, necessitates that Black audiences engage in a sampling process, where they “reuse what they have access to, whether it be subtext, entertainment, or critique” (Kresinger, 2013, p. 482). Throughout this chapter, I demonstrate how participants bring to the fore much of *Martin*’s problematic subtext, providing stern critiques of a series that is often championed as only providing entertainment.

In order to understand how participants interpret the gender ideologies rooted in *Martin*, I draw on Black feminist scholarship that focuses on the intersections of race and gender in Black popular culture. Specifically, I engage Bailey’s concept of “misogynoir” to look at how *Martin* advances the derogation of Black women and to consider how audiences recruit *Martin* into more contemporary discourses about intra-racial gender politics. Bailey describes misogynoir as “the particular brand of hatred directed at Black women in American visual and popular culture” (In Bristol, 2014, para. 2). As the impetus for Bailey’s theorization of misogynoir revolves around hip-hop culture, it is appropriate to establish how *Martin* reflects many of the sensibilities and values associated with 1990s hip-hop culture.

### ***Martin*: The Hip-Hop Sitcom**

Martin Lawrence rose to prominence first as a stand-up comedian and then as an actor in films such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *House Party* (1990), *House Party II* (1991) and *Boomerang* (1992). Lawrence developed a particularly devoted following among hip-hop fans through his stand-up comedy and his two-year stint as the host of HBO's *Def Comedy Jam*. As Vognar (2011) argues, *Def Comedy Jam* represents one of the most explicit televisual representations of the relationship between hip-hop and comedy. He writes,

With DJ Kid Capri spinning records in the wings and hosts including Martin Lawrence shouting out to the likes of Run DMC in the audience, *Def Comedy Jam* brought a hip-hop attitude to stand-up, a combination of street kid bravado and giddy, Showtime-at-the-Apollo style swagger. (p. 106-107)

As the comedian who most embodied much of the attitude, bravado, and swagger fans associated with *Def Comedy Jam*, Lawrence was championed by the entertainment press as the comedic voice of his generation for hip-hop fans. In this sense, Lawrence's comedic persona represents how hip-hop culture expands beyond the four elements of graffiti, break dancing, dj-ing, and rapping to encompass "verbal language, body language, attitude, style, and fashion" (Kitwana, 2002, p. 8)<sup>11</sup>.

Both Lawrence's content and aesthetics, and by extension *Martin's*, reflected a heavy investment in hip hop culture. In September 2017, VH1 celebrated the show as part of its *Hip Hop Honors: 90s Game-Changers*. In a video tribute to the show, hip-hop luminaries reflected on *Martin's* contributions to hip-hop culture. New York morning radio host DJ Envy describes how hip-hop was woven in the show's fabric:

The *Martin* show brought hip-hop culture to the masses. From the way that he spoke, to the outfits he wore, from the music that he chose on his show. He brought that culture to people outside of hip-hop, which was dope. (VH1, 2017)

While not as complimentary as DJ Envy's assessment, Bogle's description of *Martin's* visual aesthetic and pacing underlines other traces of hip-hop's influence on the show. He writes,

In the first year, the primary set—Martin's living—with its bold colors (purples, yellows, greens) looked like something out of a cartoon. The acting too was fast-paced and frenetic, with most cast members playing to the manic rhythm established by Lawrence. (p. 417)

Following the mode of "blue" comedians such as Redd Foxx, Richard Pryor, and Eddie Murphy, Lawrence's stand-up routines were replete with profanity, sexually explicit jokes, and musings on romantic relationships, themes that resonated with many hip-hop fans and carried over to *Martin*, albeit sanitized for network television audiences. Marketed as offering a Black male perspective on relationships, *Martin* often poked fun at the fragility of the male ego, reflecting what *Def Comedy Jam* producer Stan Lathan describes as Lawrence's ability to represent the hip-hop generation's struggles with "trying to maintain this macho exterior even though they have a lot of inner sensitivity and insecurities" (Bogle 2001, p. 416). Frank Owen (1994) observes that

---

<sup>11</sup> See Rose, 1994; Watkins, 1998; Chang, 2007 for more extended discussions on the expansive nature of hip hop culture.

watching Martin wrestle with his insecurities was part of the show's draw. He writes, "Watching [Lawrence] dissolve into a pathetic, whimpering mess reminds you that nobody does the Black male ego in crisis funnier than Martin Lawrence" (p. 76). However, for participants, there is an acute awareness of that the specter of violence against women shadows such performances of Black male angst.

### **Misogynoir and Ambivalence**

Combining misogyny and noir, Bailey (2013) coined the term misogynoir to describe "the specific violence of representational imagery depicting Black women" (p. 341). Pointing to how the convergence of racism, anti-blackness, and sexism color Black women's lived experiences, Bailey (2014) writes,

I was looking for precise language to describe why Renisha McBride would be shot in the face, why *The Onion* would think it's okay to talk about Quvenzhané the way they did<sup>12</sup>, or the hypervisibility of Black women on reality TV, the arrest of Shanisha Taylor<sup>13</sup>, the incarceration of CeCe, Laverne and Lupita being left off the *Time* list, the continued legal actions against Marissa Alexander, the twitter dragging of black women with hateful hashtags and supposedly funny Instagram images as well as how Black women are talked about in music. All these things bring to mind misogynoir and not general misogyny directed at women of color more broadly. (para. 4)

In one of her earlier essays about misogynoir, Bailey (2010) describes the "fatigued ambivalence" she experiences as a queer Black woman listening to rap music, recognizing and appreciating the genre's artistry while also holding artists accountable for how they normalize violence against women. Bailey points to a lyric from Young Money's 2009 song "Bedrock", featuring rapper Lil Wayne, as evidence of how misogynoir hides under the veneer of even the most banal pop rap song. One line reads "I knock her lights/ But she still shine." While acknowledging Lil Wayne's wit, Bailey writes, "This slightly veiled violence is often dismissed because it's said playfully and in the context of a medley that suggests a more amorous interpretation" (para. 6). Bailey's reliance on ambivalence in her conception of misogynoir is particularly useful for thinking about how participants make sense of problematic gender politics in *Martin*.

The formulaic nature of both radio-friendly rap music and the situation-comedy as a genre can often conceal the complex range of feelings each art form engenders for their audiences. In this chapter, I offer "ambivalence" as a concept for understanding participants' relationship with a television program that they identify as problematic<sup>14</sup>. Banet-Weiser (2012)

---

<sup>12</sup> As part of their coverage of the 2013 Academy Awards, the satirical website *The Onion* sent out the following tweet about then-nine-year-old actress Quvenzhané Wallis: "Everyone seems afraid to say it, but that Quvenzhané Wallis is kind of a cunt, right?"

<sup>13</sup> In 2014, Shanisha Taylor was arrested in Scottsdale, Arizona after leaving her toddlers in a parked car during a job interview.

<sup>14</sup> In a blog post, aptly titled "How to be a fan of problematic things", Rachael (2011) offers three steps to recognizing one's fandom of problematic texts. First, she argues that fans must acknowledge the problematic elements of their fan objects with excusing them. Second, they face these problematic elements and not derail conversations about them. Third, they must

identifies ambivalence as an organizing principle for brand cultures, noting that the meaning of a given brand or cultural product is never given but rather open to a variety of meanings. She notes that because ambivalence connotes inconsistency and uncertainty, it is often treated as an affect that is better avoided. However, Banet-Weiser argues that understanding ambivalence solely as a problem fails “to take seriously the cultural value of emotion and affect and the potential of ambivalence. It's generative power, for it is within these spaces that hope and anxiety, pleasure and desire, fear and insecurity are nurtured and maintained” (p. 218). For Banet-Weiser, ambivalence has the potential to “disrupt the expected flow of consumption” (p. 218).

Ambivalence creates the possibility for audiences to reject the dominant meanings encoded in a brand, product, or cultural text and allows them to occupy a negotiated or oppositional reading position simultaneously with their complicity. Related to race theory, Leonardo (2013) offers ambivalence as “a source of possible insights” that emerges once “race theory becomes aware of and reflective about its own conceptual apparatus” (p. 146). Whether related to race theory or brand cultures, ambivalence engenders reflection and requires troubling what is often taken up as commonsense. Ultimately, affirming ambivalence as it relates to a televisual text “expand[s] a text, rather than reduce[s] it” and eschews “simplistic good or bad judgments” (Thompson & Mittell, 2013, p. 1). In the following sections, I will demonstrate how participants’ ambivalence about *Martin* enables moments of reflection that disrupt the flow of merriment that situation comedies aim to produce.

### **Sheneneh: The Patron Saint of the Ratchet**

Critics and fans often cited Lawrence’s ability to play multiple characters as part of *Martin*’s appeal. Characters ranged from Martin’s mother, Mama Payne to Kung Fu master Dragonfly Jones to a past-his-prime ladies’ man, Jerome. For participants and many other fans of the show, Sheneneh Jenkins, Martin’s volatile neighbor, was the show’s most endearing yet problematic character. Sporting thick braids, large hoop earrings, and audacious colors and patterns, Sheneneh was described hip-hop magazine *The Source* as “television’s only real ‘around the way girl’” (p. Hatcher, 1993, p. 46). Describing her as “big, aggressive, loud, [and] greedy,” Todd interprets Sheneneh as “one of the most interesting and beloved characters on the show.” While participants almost universally found the character to be entertaining, many echoed the observations of critics who saw the character as little more than a “stereotypical caricature of a ghetto ‘homegirl’” (Zook, 1999, p. 57). Or as Bogle (2001) laments, “Sheneneh was a ribald parody of a pushy, know-it-all, forever attitudinizing, desperately trying-to-be-hip, always-in-your-face young urban Black woman” (p. 419). Despite such problematic elements or perhaps because of them, Sheneneh remains a fixture in Black popular culture, folded into one of the dominant discourses about Black women in popular culture: ratchetness.

#### *Sheneneh: “She’s ratchet!”*

Stallings (2013) identifies ratchet as “the performance of the failure to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race” (p. 136). Issa Rae, creator and producer of the web series *Awkward Black Girl* and HBO’s *Insecure*, provides a bawdy but productive framework for understanding ratchet:

---

acknowledge that others may have less favorable interpretations of their beloved fan objects. She writes, “You can like really problematic things and still be not only a good person, but a good social justice activist (TM)! After all, most texts have some problematic elements in them, because they’re produced by humans, who are well-known to be imperfect” (para. 2).



I can't give a dictionary definition, but I can say that it's like if 'ghetto' and 'hot shitty mess' had a baby. And that baby had no father and became a stripper, then made a sex tape with an athlete and then became a reality star. (Quoted in Palmer, 2012, para. 6)

Predating the term by over twenty years, Sheneneh occupies a precarious temporal space within Black popular culture, positioned as both the precursor and the embodiment of ratchet. This is evident in the popularity of the Nae Nae, a dance marked by exaggerated hip gyrating, neck rolling, and finger-snapping. In 2014, Atlanta-based rap group We Are Toonz released the music video for their song "Drop that Nae Nae." Soon after its release, the Nae Nae became a viral sensation, thanks in part to countless people uploading videos of themselves doing the dance. As the dance's name suggests, fans took up the Nae Nae as an homage to the popular *Martin* character. We R Toonz deftly deflected insinuations that the dance was directly influenced by Sheneneh. However, group member CalLamar admits that the Nae Nae was inspired by "a ratchet girl in the club dancing kind of funny and the best girl to describe it is Sheneneh from *Martin*" (Ramirez, 2014). CalLamar's description is an example of the anachronistic slippage that occurs with Sheneneh, wherein a character that originated in the 1990s is heralded as the embodiment of a more contemporary phenomenon.

#### *Sheneneh and the Controlling Image of Ghetto Black Women*

Much of the participants' frustrations with Sheneneh was rooted in how they viewed the character as reifying controlling images of poor and working-class Black femininity, specifically the "black bitch" and "welfare queen." Situating the emergence of the images within the sociopolitical climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hill Collins (2000) argues that they offered not only a convenient explanation of poor and working-class Black women's subordinate class status but also the rationale for the state to augment the distribution of social services. She writes,

Too-strong, bitchy women are less attractive to men because they are not feminine...to compensate, these less-attractive women use their sexuality to "catch" men and hopefully become pregnant so that the men will marry them; and ...men see through this game and leave these women as single mothers who often have little recourse but to either try and "catch" another man or "hustle" the government. (p. 137)

Arguing that a character like Sheneneh would not be acceptable on network television in 2015, Taj is particularly troubled by the ways that popular culture continues to bring Sheneneh back, and in the process extends ideologies that she hoped society had evolved beyond:

The character Sheneneh is hella fucked up. This idea of the ghetto Black woman is just being exploited without any responsibility. I don't think there is any accountability, historical accountability, to how that archetype [works]. We had the welfare queen with Ronald Regan, which basically demonizes all Black women in ten seconds. Understand that this is a 90s show, post-Regan for it to be comical and for it to be used in a meme, it just shows that the legacy lives on.

Here Taj observes that part of the character's appeal during the 1990s was related to its ability to conjure other representations of Black women in popular culture and mainstream media. As it turns out, just as it has in the years since, the Sheneneh character cannot be read as a single text but rather adjacent to other texts, which collectively constitute "our culture's image bank" of the ghetto Black woman (Fiske, 1987, p. 108). In this sense, Sheneneh extends the Sapphire stereotype. The various histories associated with the character contribute to participants' ambivalent relationship with *Martin*. For example, Monica states,

I love Sheneneh but I'm always so torn especially being an [African-American Studies] major, understanding the historical standpoint and significance of a character like Sheneneh and then putting it into modern day. They make her to be just the most ratchetest of ratchetest things.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, while Monica finds Sheneneh hilarious-- the history of Black female representations she learns through her coursework at WCU contributes to her conflicted affinity for the character. Monica's conflicted relationship with Sheneneh can also be understood as an example of participants "feeling some type of way" about *Martin*. Drawing on the Black vernacular expression to explain the affective negotiations required of Black female audiences watching Black women engage in "ratchet" behavior on reality television, Warner (2015) describes "feeling some type of way" as "a vacillation of emotions that blur and make it difficult to articulate one emotion over another" (p. 145). Like Monica, participants often acknowledged that they became more ambivalent about Sheneneh over time. Renee acknowledges that as she matured she became increasingly uncomfortable with *Martin*'s representations of Black women and is particularly disturbed that Sheneneh remains the dominant representation of Black femininity. She states,

**Renee:** When you 're younger and you're watching it and you're like "Oh, that's funny." But then going back and realizing like Oh like some of the stuff is messed up. When you're younger you can't really see that. You laugh at it just to laugh.

**Patrick:** What's messed up?

**Renee:** The whole Sheneneh thing. Even though it's funny, it depicts Black women in a negative way. When you're younger you see that it's comical. And the fact that Martin is playing that role, when you're young you don't really see that. That's a man's perception on the way women act. Black women. I guess the messed up part about that is people tend to think about the Sheneneh character more than the Gina. And then so you have all these stereotypes with how black women are supposed to act, even when you do see a black woman acting other than that stereotypical role.

Like Monica, participants were consistently conflicted about how much they enjoyed the character, with some participants expressing shame for how Sheneneh influenced their expectations of Black women in their everyday interactions. Pointing to her hair style, clothing, and general disposition, Randall reads Sheneneh as transgressing appropriate boundaries of Black feminine performance, harkening to representations of excess in ratchet characters:

Every time [Sheneneh] would walk in the apartment she would always have some sort of radical hairdo, very low cut clothes...Sheneneh would always have on very loud lipstick. She would talk a certain way. Since Sheneneh identified as being female that kind of showed me that Black females during the 1990s were expected to be seen as being very loud, both in the way they act and the way they dress.

For Randall, Sheneneh's representation "construct[ed] a 'natural Black femininity...central to an 'authentic' Black culture" (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 137), admitting that he once expected the Black women he encountered in his life to behave similarly to Sheneneh:

When I started hearing the word ghetto in school and sort of how people would describe ghetto and I would watch *Martin* and I would see Sheneneh. I thought Sheneneh was the living, breathing definition of ghetto. Normally, people describe ghetto as being very unruly, very loud, very obnoxious. It seemed as if the very definition of ghetto equated to being a Black female...I'm a little ashamed to say [I] would start thinking Black people are a little ghetto. That show kind of changed my view towards Blackness in the sense that I sort of made the mistake in thinking that only Black people could be ghetto.

Randall's exclusive association of the world ghetto with Black people, specifically Black women, illustrates how "when connotation and denotation become one and the same, representation appears natural, making the historical and social construction invisible" (Kellner and Share, 2005, p. 12).

However, participants demonstrated a keen awareness of the elements that went into constructing Sheneneh as the quintessential ghetto Black woman, including as Christopher observes, reifying a stereotype that Black women are loud, confrontational, and possessing "something in them to make them go over the top." Furthermore, he believes that show's writers and producers selected the character's name to connote her class and education status:

[Sheneneh] could have had a simple name but they wanted to choose Sheneneh, ...Individuals would hear this name and think automatically that this is someone from the ghetto. They're Black. They don't have a high education.

Through critical media literacy, educators can encourage audiences to disentangle the significant work producers and audiences perform to make Sheneneh, as Monica describes—the most ratchetest of the ratchetest.

*Sheneneh: Whose lines are they anyway?*

While participants found Sheneneh's performance of Black femininity troubling, they were particularly disturbed that a heterosexual, cisgendered, Black man created a character to speak for the experiences of poor and working-class Black women who have historically been prevented from telling their own stories through mainstream media platforms. Acknowledging Martin Lawrence's influence on young comedians, Reggie places Lawrence's portrayal of Sheneneh in the tradition of other Black male comedians such as Flip Wilson, Eddie Murphy, and Tyler Perry who have learned that, as Nelson (1997) argues, "[t]he way to elicit a guaranteed

laugh is to put on a dress and play the unattractive, dominating, sexually voracious black woman” (p. 102). Reggie continues,

What's problematic [about Black men in drag] is it's about agency and your image. The problem with Emmanuel Hudson and Martin is more that they are creating constructions of Black women with their bodies versus a Black woman being in place to create their own representations of themselves.

Here Reggie puts *Martin* in conversation with comedians Phillip and Emmanuel Hudson’s 2012 “Ratchet Girl Anthem,” a music video that has received over 13 million views on YouTube and helped popularize the term. While Sheneneh serves as a base from which subsequent generations of Black males build their comedic depictions of Black women, both the Hudson brothers and We R Toonz extend Lawrence’s performance of what Means Coleman (2011) categorizes as “Black woman face.” Gesturing to the tradition of blackface, Means Coleman argues that Black male performers distort both Black women and the rituals of drag” while casting Black Women as “intellectually inferior and physically repulsive for entertainment” (p. 36). Furthermore, such performances reinforce, rather than critique essentialist notions of gender identification, thus quelling drag’s transformative potential (Johnson, 2003)<sup>15</sup>.

Tonya notes that despite the fact that Sheneneh is one of her favorite characters on the show, she has become increasingly bothered the more she considers the character’s potential impact on audiences’ perceptions of Black women:

It’s terrible. It’s really terrible. I like Sheneneh but now that I’m a little bit more conscious, I don’t like how Martin Lawrence as a Black male comedian is taking this trope of a Black woman and making fun of her. There are real women like Sheneneh. Even though she’s a such a caricature, I feel like it’s not fair to dehumanize her. She has the huge butt and the big breasts and the fake hair and the nails. And she got all this attitude. And she looks kind of manly. So, I don’t think that’s fair.

Tanya’s references to Sheneneh’s body places the character within a history of what Fleetwood (2009) describes as spectacles of black female excess. Fleetwood posits that “cultural production and scholarship on the black female body” works under the shadow casts by “the specter” of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ (p. 118). ‘Hottentot Venus’ is the name given to Sarah Baartmann, a South African woman who was displayed in animal cages throughout nineteenth-century Europe and treated as a freak show attraction due to her supposedly large buttocks and genitalia. After her death, Baartman’s skeleton and body cast were displayed in a French museum until the late 1970s (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999). Sheneneh both draws on and contributes to a bank of images that constructs “the Black female body and the sexual imaginary associated with that body” as

---

<sup>15</sup> In a column for *Essence* magazine, actor Isaiah Washington (1996) argues that the drag-queen has elevated to the level of “subhuman rapist, mugger, or drug dealer” as stereotypical roles for Black actors (p. 34). While applauding drag performances of actors like Flip Wilson, Jamie Foxx, Antonio Fargas, Martin Lawrence, and Ru Paul, Washington asks “When I look at these very talented and funny men, I can’t help laughing. Yet I wonder if I should be crying instead because these seem to be the only kind of Black men society finds acceptable” (p. 34).

excessive and thus the Black woman marks “the boundaries for normative codes of the white female body and femininity” (p. 111).

Like Reggie and Tonya, Taj views Lawrence’s portrayal of Sheneneh in terms of agency and consent:

I feel like Martin Lawrence exploited Black women and did not get consent for him to exploit our narrative. And then we have memes where Sheneneh be like or basically ‘Bitches be like’ and it will be Sheneneh. Basically, we don't like this person, this archetype, this character. Black women are so policed even if someone remotely sounds like Sheneneh [or] their name remotely sounds like Sheneneh. They're demonized because of the work of that particular character, because of the work of *Martin*.

In the above comment, Taj refers to the popular meme, “Bitches Be Like”, which highlights “the contradiction in what people understand themselves to be and what occurs from other perspectives” (Jackson, 2014, para. 17). In one version of the meme, a man is pictured in a cage accompanied by the caption: “Bitches be like...I trust my man. He at home now waiting on me.” This particular iteration of the meme works under the premise that Black women are possessive in romantic relationships, even when they claim that they trust their partners. Bitches be like is one example of how memes are often used to “criticize, make fun of, or dehumanize women in some capacity” (Bowen, 2016, p. 35). This is particularly true of poor and working-class Black women. Jackson (2014) identifies memes as a primary means through which Black women are denigrated online. She writes, “Pick a meme, any meme, conceived or co-opted by Black social media—I’ll show you a meme that worms its way toward respectability political rhetoric, with misogynoir at its core” (para. 17). She goes on to argue that “misogynoir is the fulcrum of anti-blackness in these memes” representing a form of ventriloquism that robs Black women “of the ownership of their own words” (para. 16). For this reason, Taj contrasts Black women’s ability to craft their own stories about their lives in reality television with Lawrence’s portrayal of Sheneneh. Drawing parallels between *Love and Hip Hop*’s Chrissy Lumpkin and Sheneneh, Taj notes that ultimately, “Chrissy is a female-bodied person who is kind of consenting to her narrative.” While the Black women on reality television have some agency in how they are portrayed, they must still maneuver within the codes and conventions of the genre. Thus Springer (2007) argues that, “reality TV participants benefit from” the genre’s “regime of truth only to the extent that they adhere to dominant ideas about race, class, gender, sexuality and physical ability” (p. 266). Thus, for some scholars, Black female reality TV stars are less a departure from the Sheneneh archetype but rather an extended remix of it.

### **Like Martin with No Gina (The ideal Black Relationship)**

Feeling like Katrina with no FEMA/Like Martin with no Gina  
- Kanye West, **Flashing Lights**

Along with *Living Single*, *Martin* was one of the first situation-comedies to feature young, urban, unmarried Black professionals, reflecting a broader trend in 1990s situation-comedies, which shifted from focusing on families to romantic relationships and friendships. In the epigraph for this section Kanye West equates Hurricane Katrina victims’ need for federal assistance with Martin’s need for Gina. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter and as evinced

by frequent references in Black popular culture, Martin and Gina's iconic relationship serves as a model for many Black millennials. Raina admits that she and her peers emulate Martin and Gina's relationship, a desire reinforced by references in popular music. She states, "I think they get along pretty well. They are the ideal couples in songs and stuff." Todd points to Martin and Gina as an example of a supportive heterosexual relationship:

Through thick and thin they stayed with each other. They eventually got married. They had their ups and downs, their disagreements but they stayed together. They didn't give up on each other. 'Martin without Gina,' that's a saying. Gina was really supportive of Martin and Martin really loved Gina.

Todd evokes the Kanye West line from "Flashing Lights," signaling how Martin and Gina serve as a signifier for strong Black heterosexual relationships in popular Black music. Todd attributes Black audiences' affinity for Martin and Gina's relationship with their ability to remain together despite going through rough patches. For Randall, *Martin* offered a representation of Black masculinity within the context of a romantic relationship, which was more in line with his values, remarking,

The marriage in *Good Times* showed me a marriage I didn't really want. I don't want to be a very dominant, aggressive male. I would say Martin and Gina's relationship, I would sort of want more of a relationship like that...When it came down to it if one of them was feeling down and sad, they would also be there for each other. I just felt like Martin and Gina, they were down for each other.

By describing Martin and Gina as being "down for each other", Randall gestures to how the couple is taken up as the quintessential "ride or die" relationship among Black millennials and within Black popular culture.

The term "ride or die" is often used within hip-hop culture to describe romantic relationships, whereby the parties exhibit extreme devotion to one another, weathering external challenges that would sever more superficial bonds. However, for some participants it is Gina's undying devotion to Martin that makes *Martin* particularly problematic. These criticisms echo one of Zook's (1999) primary issues with the show. She writes, "The character of Martin certainly was romantic, clearly and unabashedly devoted to his 'boo,' Gina. And yet I propose that it was precisely this romantic vision of love which served to conceal and even mitigate the show's larger misogyny" (p. 54). However, within "ride or die" discourse, the loyal female partner or "ride or die chick" is lauded as the ideal romantic partner. Pointing to The Lox's rap song of the same title, Perry, Smith, and Brooms (2014) describe the "Ride or Die Chick" as a woman "willing to go to any lengths, legal or otherwise, in support of their boyfriend's economic or recreational interests" (p. 491).

"Ride or die chicks" are the main characters in what Hunter and Soto (2009) describe as the "Bonnie and Clyde" subgenre of rap music that "depicts women as loyal partners in crime (literally and metaphorically)" (p. 182). Throughout Black popular culture Martin and Gina's relationship is heralded as one of the ideal Black romantic couplings, a relationship founded on reciprocity and unwavering loyalty. Upon further inspection, the "Bonnie and Clyde" of 1990s

Black situation-comedies prove to be just as imbalanced as its rap counterparts<sup>16</sup>. During our interview, Randall praised Gina's role as *Martin's* "moral compass" and her ability to calm Martin during tumultuous times. However, Randall was stumped when attempting to identify instances where Martin offered emotional support to Gina, and notes, "Truthfully, I do not remember any episode when Gina was in distress and Martin came to her rescue. Not to say it didn't happen, I just don't remember it." Echoing aspects of her past romantic relationships, Tonya also finds the imbalance of emotional labor in Martin and Gina's relationship particularly disturbing:

Sometimes I just don't like what Martin puts Gina through. It just seems one-sided and unfair. Like Gina is so loyal to Martin and he's just so crazy and almost self-centered that he does a lot of stuff that can negatively impact Gina. But she's always there. I appreciate that. It just kind of reminds me of a past relationship I used to have so I'm like 'oh this is kind of weird.

Gina's unwavering loyalty to Martin, which is regularly championed in popular culture and among participants, disturbs Elise. Like other participants Elise states that her peers invoke Martin and Gina to signify a strong Black romantic relationship. However, Elise expresses skepticism about the limits of the unwavering devotion personified in Martin and Gina's relationship:

It's more of a ride or die thing. I've heard people say you're my Martin, you're my Gina. Through good or bad we got each other. I don't know how I feel about that. I feel like there comes a time when I can be your ride or die but to what extent? When is the point when this is not okay? Us constantly arguing and bickering is not healthy. Is that what a relationship should be about? I'm not saying relationship are perfect [but] ride or die, for what? What is the end goal?

Elise and Tonya's critiques trouble the notion that strong, healthy relationships are replete with conflict.

Participants viewed Martin as demanding a degree of emotional support, which he did not reciprocate. Gina attention to Martin is indicative of how media culture interpellates women as "the monitors of all sexual and emotional relationships, responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects as well as pleasing men sexually...and taking care of men's self-esteem" (Gill, 2007, p. 150). The convergence of these expectations is evident in *Martin's* pilot episode, "Beauty and The Beast." The episode, which originally aired on August, 27, 1992, centers on Gina's ire after Martin make disparaging remarks about their relationship on his talk radio show. In the episode, Martin addresses the topic of "male sensitivity" on his radio show,

---

<sup>16</sup> Bonnie and Clyde has been regularly evoked in hip-hop songs. On 1996's "Me and My Girlfriend," Tupac Shakur raps "96 Bonnie and Clyde, Me and girlfriend". In 1997, Eminem released "'97 Bonnie and Clyde". Sampling elements of Shakur's "Me and My Girlfriend", Jay-Z released "'03 Bonnie and Clyde" with Beyonce in 2003. In addition to the aforementioned artists, rappers Tink, Yo-Yo, Mercedes, Haystack, and Cozz have each released songs titled "Bonnie and Clyde". G-Eazy, DJ Khaled, 21 Savage, DJ Luke Nasty, and YG are among the artists who have referenced Bonnie and Clyde in their songs.

describing it as a “plot to make men house-trained suckers.” When a caller accuses him of either being single or being controlled by his girlfriend, Martin goes ballistic:

**Martin:** Let me tell you a little something about my girl, Gina. Gina worships the ground I walk on. If I tell Gina to jump, she just says how high. I tell her to watch her head because you're going to the moon. Gina don't give me all that back talk because she knows she got a man that can [starts pelvic thrusting] deliver.

Unbeknownst to Martin, Gina and her co-workers are listening to his show. Furious and embarrassed, Gina and Pam storm over to Martin’s apartment to confront him about his comments. While confronting Martin about his comments on his radio show regarding their relationship, Gina reveals that Martin, despite his claims to the contrary, cried while watching *Beauty and The Beast* a few nights before. Attempting to save face in front of Tommy and Cole, Martin requests that the couple retreat to his bedroom to continue their discussion. At the height of their argument, Martin orders Gina to leave, proclaiming that their relationship is over, only to beg her to stay when she walks towards the door. Just as the couple resolves their differences and head out to rejoin their friends, Martin makes a final request:

**Martin:** Babe, I know it's not the right time. I was wondering. I'm begging you. When we go out here can you make it look like I won?

**Gina:** Martin what were we just talking about?

**Martin:** It's a man thing, Gina. It's a man thing.

Martin asks Gina to protect his reputation despite insulting her on his radio show. In this instance, Martin asks Gina to put his needs above her own with the expectation that she will comply. As participants have identified, Gina’s willingness to perform the bulk of the emotional labor in their relationship is one way that *Martin* constructs her as the ideal heterosexual subject. Establishing the racialized implications of such gendered expectations, Harris (2016) explains,

When [Black women] fail to be the ever-nurturing Mammy, we’re automatically thrust into the role of foul-tempered Sapphire (aka the Sassy Black Woman or Angry Woman), just as every time we’re sexual or sensual, we’re automatically slotted into the Jezebel label (para. 14).

Pointing to controlling images of Black women in popular culture, Harris goes on to argue that such flattened representations “smothers the ability to recognize that which is authentic, multi-dimensional and human about Black women” (para. 11). Participants were particularly disturbed by what they deemed as Martin’s superficial appreciation for Gina, finding a line from the bedroom scene particularly troubling. After Martin apologizes and their confrontation deescalates, Martin expresses his concerns about Gina leaving him:

**Martin:** Girl, oh my goodness, I thought you were going to leave me. I can't have that girl. You got some good stuff.

The line is representative of how *Martin* regularly positions women as “sexual objects to be displayed and ogled,” reinforcing an idea that “there is a ‘natural’ and instinctive need for



men...to possess and control their lovers” (Zook, 1999, p. 54-55). For Robin, the line advances the idea that Black women’s value relates to their sexual ability. She states, “That was kind of wack. The more I watch it the more problematic it is. I can't have you leaving me, you got some good stuff. Equating her worth to her sexuality.” For participants, Martin regularly equated a woman’s worth with their beauty and their ability to retain a mate. This theme was particularly pervasive in his contentious relationship with Gina’s best friend, Pam.

While participants were critical of Martin’s interactions with women on the show in general, they found his exchanges with Pam especially troubling. Zook (1999) observes that, “Martin’s interactions with Pam represent a key site of ideological struggle” (p. 56), with Pam countering Gina’s more deferential performance of femininity. Monica describes Pam as a woman who is “not going to take no shit from nobody”. *Martin* fans find Pam and Martin’s spats to be particularly enjoyable and they represent a vital part of the show’s legacy<sup>17</sup>. Several participants perceive Pam’s ability to match Martin insult for insult as representing authentic relationships between Black men and women. Monica states, “The dynamic between Martin and Pam is very interesting because they are always going at it. And sometimes it gets really disrespectful but at the same time she's disrespectful back.” What some may have dismissed as simple good-natured ribbing, participants identified as being undergirded by elements of misogynoir. While Pam’s barbs were regularly related to Martin’s height and ears, Martin often associated Pam with dogs and horses while also disparaging her personal hygiene practices. Zook (1999) observes that throughout the series, “Martin berates Pam at every opportunity, often referring to her as unfeminine, hairy, and animal-like” (p. 55). The intersection of misogyny and anti-Blackness is evident in the following quip:

**Martin:** What you need to do is go in the back and straighten out those buckshots in the back of your neck. Girl, your hair is so nappy Wilson couldn’t pick it.

In this insult, Martin ridicules the coarseness of Pam’s hair, using the terms “naps” and “buckshots” pejoratively to refer to her tight coils. By imploring Pam to straighten her hair, Martin champions Eurocentric beauty standards, advancing “rhetoric that explicitly and implicitly devalue” Black women’s “natural hair” and privilege[s] straight hair as the ideal for female beauty” (Lindsey, 2013, p. 29). Martin points to Pam’s inability or unwillingness to adhere to a politics of respectability—including being demure and observing Eurocentric beauty standards—as contributing to her inability to “keep a man”. Furthermore, participants recognized how female characters were imbued with particular personality traits based on their skin tones. Tonya asks,

Why you gotta talk about Pam that bad? Pam gets talked about bad a lot...Pam just gets treated like a dog. She gets called a dog a lot. It's just kind of messed up, the dark skin women's depictions, no matter if it's him [as Sheneneh] or if he's doing it to Pam. They just get treated so bad. And I just think that's really unfair.

For Tonya, Martin’s treatment of Pam was in line with *Martin*’s generally disparaging representations of darker-skinned Black women. *Martin*’s treatment of Pam reveals how any

---

<sup>17</sup> Fans have uploaded several super cut videos of Martin and Pam trading insults to YouTube. YouTube user Rodney Cummins created four videos, mashing up Martin and Pam’s exchanges. Each of Cummins’ videos have received over 600,000 views.

analysis of the show's regressive gender politics is fraught if it does not account for the presence of anti-Blackness in the show's misogynistic representations of Black women. Ultimately, while participants championed *Martin's* representations of unmarried, Black professionals, upon deeper reflection they identified elements of Martin and Gina's relationship that are anything but ideal.

Yet despite these problematic elements, participants find some pleasure—albeit conflicted—in watching *Martin*. As Taj describes watching the pilot during one of the focus groups, “Sometimes it was so awkward I had to laugh. It was painfully funny.” Here, Taj's laughter does not necessarily signal a positive identification with the jokes but rather a form of release from the anxiety they produce. On one hand, participants' ambivalence about the parts of *Martin* that are misogynistic and sexist can be read as reflecting a form of what Lindsey (2013) dubs as melodious misogyny. Building on Bradley's (2014) conception of the sonic pleasures, Lindsey calls on scholars to reorient their ears, eyes, and bodies to account for the ways that Black and brown women often negotiate the pleasures they derive from hip-hop music, particularly related to their engagement with the beat. For Lindsey, melodious misogyny offers a frame for thinking through Black and Brown young women's range of affective investments in hip-hop culture, while also challenging the notion that such engagement is “uncritical or rooted in a false consciousness” (p. 63). She argues that melodious misogyny provides “an entry point for theorizing the tensions and complexities of the lived experiences and socially and culturally identities of Black and Brown women and girls. These lived experiences have tensions, contradictions, and frequencies” (p. 63). On the other hand, participants' laughter reveals the ways that *Martin's* resonance is experienced as “disturbing and unpleasant, as revolting sorts of dissonance, as sharp shocks, or as involving a range of mixed responses—being surprised, startled, bored, amused, ashamed; [and] bemused” (Paasonen, 2011, p. 16-17). In this sense, laughter should be taken up as speaking to participants' competing and even unnamed orientations to the program.

Throughout this chapter, I highlighted participants' conflicted identifications with *Martin*, reflecting how their experiences with the show are laden with ambivalence. It is clear that participants do not engage the program mindlessly. Rather they deftly problematize *Martin*, while identifying aspects of the show that make it a valuable resource from which they make sense of their gender politics. As problematic as the show is, *Martin's* potential as a pedagogical text is predicated on the strong—and often competing—feelings it elicits in participants. Upon further reflection, participants were unsettled by their relationship with a media text that had previously been a site of joy.

As 15 of my study's 27 participants were women, it is not surprising that many of them offered sustained critiques of the representations of women in 1990s Black television. While this chapter focused on *Martin*, participants found other 1990s Black situation-comedies to similarly egregious in their embrace of misogynoir—most notably *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Participants' ability to wrestle with the problematic and productive elements of 1990s Black situation-comedies harkens to Ahmed's (2010) work on happy objects and her conception of the feminist kill-joy. As demonstrated throughout this study, participants derive great pleasure from consuming 1990s Black television. However, such pleasure is not absent of a keen awareness of how the programs advance misogynoir. Ahmed describes feminists as “affect alien[s]” who “might even kill joy because [they] refuse to share an orientation toward certain things as being good because [they] do not find the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising” (p. 39). While not every participant identified as feminist, the majority of participants recognized

that the joy *Martin* engenders often comes at the expense of Black women. Participants run the risk of killing the joy they and others experience through *Martin* by calling attention to the show's misogynoir. Through this process, participants temper their nostalgia for 1990s Black situation-comedies while questioning the programs' reverence among the previous generations from whom the programs were inherited.

## Chapter 7: The End

This study explores how Black students at a top-tier research university draw on 1990s Black sitcoms as resources for building community, imagining future versions of themselves, and for critiquing the regressive gender ideologies that the programs advance through their residual circulation. I employed qualitative research methods through semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus groups, and textual analyses. I collected data from March 2015 until November 2016 at West Coast University (WCU), a large public research-one institution in the western United States. In order to understand participants' engagement with the programs in their own words, I conducted 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews. To observe participants in engaging in collective viewing I conducted two focus groups, each with three participants. In addition to collecting data through interviews and focus groups, I also performed close textual readings of the 1990s Black sitcoms participants referenced during interviews and focus groups.

In chapter four, I explore how 1990s Black sitcoms contribute to participants' notions of social mobility. Drawing on Fisherkeller's (1997) concept of imaginative strategies, I discovered that shows like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Martin*, *Moesha*, and *Living Single* provided source material for participants to imagine future versions of themselves. The sitcoms informed participants' educational, social, and professional aspirations. I established that participants were able to select imaginative strategies from 1990s Black sitcoms because social mobility was central to many televisual constructions of Blackness during the era. Participants saw the sheer number of Black actors in lead roles as indicative of increased opportunities for Black social mobility, not only within the entertainment industry but throughout American society. Sitcoms like *A Different World*, promoted a college-going culture that was extremely attractive to participants, providing images of college life to which they could aspire. Through characters like Moesha Mitchell or *A Different World*'s Dwayne Wayne, participants imagined themselves as college students drawing on the characters' experiences to help navigate their journey through academia. Participants pointed to 1990s Black sitcoms as shaping their visions of their lives post-college, specifically their ideas on friendship, romantic coupling, and work. The sitcoms contributed to participants' beliefs that their college degree would help them achieve upper-middle class status. Programs like *Living Single*, *Martin*, and *Fresh Prince* encouraged participants to find romantic partners who were similarly educated and thus able to contribute to their social mobility. Through the shows, participants understood the idea that achieving the American dream requires strong friend and familial bonds. And with the programs serving as their guides, participants expressed their desires to have similar occupations as the characters on the shows. However, they also pointed to the shows' "very special episodes" about issues such as racial profiling and assimilating in corporate environments as informing their understanding of the unique forms of racial oppression associated with upward mobility for Black people. Such episodes were instructive for participants as they highlighted the ways that class privilege often fails to protect Black people from even the most quotidian forms of racism.

In chapter five, I look at how participants developed a collective racial identity through their shared affinity for 1990s Black sitcoms. Throughout the chapter, I explore how participants engage the programs as black cult classics, highlighting how television shows that are often panned by television critics and thus omitted from many conceptions of an American television heritage are held in high regard by Black audiences. Participants described watching reruns of 1990s Black sitcoms in as not only a normative part of their upbringing also imagined it as a standard activity for most Black people in their age group. A knowledge of and an affinity for

1990s Black sitcoms was understood not only a way of connecting participants to other young people their age but to older generations of black viewers as well. The programs allowed participants to develop a set of competencies that enable them to understand the various intertextual and intermedia references that abound in the sitcoms. Sharing the ability to identify the fashion, music, and Black history featured in the programs was foundational for how participants saw the shows as helping to facilitate their membership in a larger imagined Black community. Participants credited their families with being the primary means through which they were introduced to the shows. I frame this transfer of media fan objects as a form of familial inheritance. The programs were often the subject of conversation among participants and other Black WCU students. While students described their white classmates as being overwhelmingly unaware of shows like *Martin* and *Moesha*, they described their affinities for such shows as point of connection between them and other Black WCU students. Specifically, participants framed watching and discussing the shows with their Black peers as a way that they coped with the isolation they feel as Black students at WCU. Participants described regularly invoking catchphrases from their favorite shows in conversations with their friends. Participants described the pleasure they received from sharing clips of their favorite episodes on various social media platforms. The confirmation that their favorite clips similarly resonated with their peers further solidified the feelings of racial belonging that the programs endeared.

In chapter six, I focus on the ambivalent relationship participants have with 1990s Black sitcoms, focusing specifically on the most popular sitcom among participants—*Martin*. Participants were troubled by how the show continues to circulate anti-Black misogyny within Black popular culture twenty years after the end of its network television run. Participants found Martin's next door neighbor Sheneneh Jenkins particularly vexing. While most participants admitted to finding the character funny, they cited Sheneneh as a character that exemplifies stereotypes of Black women as loud, violent, and abrasive. Participants pointed to the ways that Sheneneh is recruited into within more contemporary popular discourses about unruly Black women such as ratchet. Because Martin Lawrence performed the character in drag, participants critiqued Lawrence's power to help shape a dominant narrative about Black women in popular culture. Participants also expressed great ambivalence about Martin's relationship with his girlfriend Gina. Martin and Gina's relationship is often held up in popular culture, particularly rap music, as an ideal romantic relationship between Black men and women. Reading Gina as an incredibly dutiful partner, participants were hyper-critical of what they deemed as the disproportionate amount of emotional labor she performs in their relationship. Participants were also dismayed by the ways that Martin objectified Gina, framing her worth in terms of her beauty and sexual availability. Martin's relationship with Gina was understood as reflective of the show's general contempt for Black women. Participants pointed to Martin's contentious relationship with Gina's best friend, Pam, as emblematic of the ways the show traffics in anti-Black misogyny. While participants expressed enjoying watching the two trade insults, they noted that many of Martin's insults related to how Pam failed to reflect Eurocentric standards of beauty. Participants found Martin's propensity for comparing Pam to animals particularly disturbing.

### **Limitations of my study**

One of the primary limitations of this project is that I only conducted two focus groups. With the goal of observing students engaging in collective viewing of 1990s black situation comedies, I was only able to assemble two focus groups with three young women in each focus group. In

each focus group, participants watched the *Martin's* pilot episode. If I would have been able to conduct more focus groups, I would have been able to have a richer set of data around collective viewing practices. I initially intended to conduct focus groups around the pilot episodes of other 1990s Black sitcoms, including the *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Moesha*, and *Different World*. However, because I was unable to recruit enough students, I decided to center the focus group sessions on the most popular sitcom among participants, *Martin*.

Another limitation of the study is that my sampling procedure focused exclusively on college students. While they provided valuable insights, their views and experiences with the texts may not be representative of the larger Black community. When comparing college students to non-student adults, Sears (1986) contends that “college students are likely to have less-crystallized attitudes, less-formulated senses of self, stronger cognitive skills, stronger tendencies to comply with authority, and more unstable peer group relationships” (p. 515). In their study of the civic engagement of Black college students attending majority White colleges, Leath and Chavous (2017) note a demonstrative shift in Black students’ political views about “societal equity and fairness” after encountering a hostile campus racial climate during their first year in college (p. 233). For example, participants’ strident critiques of *Martin's* gender politics echoes some of those offered by Black feminist cultural critics and scholars. As college students, participants may be more likely to be exposed to conversations about interlocking forms of oppressions than non-students.

### **Broader Implications of Research Findings**

This project intervenes in fan studies, a field that Jenkins (2014) laments “has been ‘color blind’ in all the of the worst senses of the term” (p. 97). Jenkins notes that the field’s lack of attention to issues of race is enabled by the fan studies scholars’ general indifference to music and sports, sites where fans of color participate in large numbers. As detailed in chapter five, participants understand 1990s Black sitcoms as a fan object that often intersects with their interest in sports, Black music, and Black fashion. I argue that understanding participants’ relationship with 1990s Black sitcoms as a form of fandom, may help challenge “our understanding of what a fan is, our understanding of how they are producers as well as consumers” and “the role identity can play in the importance of identifying as a fan” (Wanzo, 2014, para. 1.6). Participants’ expectations that other Black people share similar affinities for 1990s Black sitcoms also reflects how taste can be understood as racialized, “shaped by who has access to particular cultural experiences and discursive resources, structured by who is encouraged or discouraged from displaying particular kinds of cultural preferences” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 98). Ultimately, this project contributes a racial analysis to a growing body of literature that examines how fandom is passed from one generation to the next, (Ford, 2014; Hogarty, 2015; Padua, 2017; Petrone, 2014).

This study also raises questions about what Black television representations from the past are available for audiences to engage, highlighting the political nature of media heritage. For example, as much of Nick at Nite’s initial programming centered around 1950s sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best*, Spigel (1995) notes that representations of working-class women and women of color were absent from the station’s offerings. While acknowledging that shows like *The Goldbergs* (1952-1956) and *Beulah* (1950-1953) were panned during their initial network television runs for their stereotypical depictions of marginalized groups, Spigel argues that “for better or worse, they form part of our ‘television heritage,’ a part that Nick at Nite and other syndication outlets often exclude from our view of the cultural past” (p. 21). She contends

that for a generation of young people growing up on reruns of past television, “this process of exclusion...creates an image of the past that is highly one dimensional” (p. 21).

Fuller (2012) observes a similar process occurring with *Gimme a Break* (1981-1987), a situation-comedy starring Nell Carter as Nell Harper, an aspiring singer looking after her dead friend’s husband and three daughters. Fuller attributes both the lack of scholarly attention paid to the program as well as its exclusion from Black television nostalgia to ways that Harper is easily dismissed as exemplifying the mammy stereotype. She writes, “*Gimme a Break* has not been embraced as a part of Black popular culture and nostalgia the way that *Diff’rent Strokes* and *The Jeffersons* have, despite the fact that these shows were also criticized as ‘stereotypical’” (p. 117). In 2006, in advance of the DVD release of *Gimme a Break*’s first season, cable channel TV One aired a marathon of the series. Fuller notes that in the channel’s attempts to “bring *Gimme a Break* into the Black television canon”, TV One was compelled to preface their marathon by acknowledging the show’s “controversial” premise. While Fuller ultimately concludes that Harper is a mammy figure, she offers that a careful analysis of the show reveals how stereotypes should not be read as static but instead viewed as “reconstructed to fit the needs and the limitations of the social context and of the particular text in which they appear” (p. 105). The *Gimme a Break* example speaks to the highly political nature of popular culture heritage. A question that, while beyond the scope of this study, deserves greater attention in future research—what are the institutional factors that limit the past televisual representations available to viewers? Spigel (1995) observes, “Alternative histories and counter-memories are still typically excluded from the mass media and for this reason they are often erased from consciousness...television even erases its own past; it selects only a few programmes for syndication and leaves out countless others” (p. 31). Why are some stereotypical television representations of Black life, such as *Gimme a Break*’s Nell Harper, lost in the television archives, while others such as *Martin*’s Sheneneh Jenkins continue to thrive in cancellation’s afterlife?

This work points to the importance of understanding how audiences make sense of residual media texts within changing contexts. As 1990s Black sitcoms continue to circulate, they do so in a social and political context very different than their original broadcast run. While this may seem obvious, it bears repeating. As Patterson (2016) notes, “Through different temporal contexts of a media artifact’s social life and circulation, audiences’ engagement with a text will change as they imbue it with new or different meanings” (p. 840). Furthermore, the continued circulation of 1990s Black sitcoms occurs within a technological landscape that allows audiences more control over when and how they engage television. As Kompare (2010) writes,

Older platforms such as DVD, cable, and even broadcasting still remain viable, but online distribution continues to grow and develop as more varied and participatory means through which people use, rather than only view, rerun television...These pasts are not only repeated through ‘official’ means. Rather, they are increasingly under control of media users, who, individually and collectively, shape how media is distributed, understood, and remembered. (p. 80).

In an environment where there is no absence of Black media images and Black audiences have more control over how and when they engage such images, we must question the utility of representational strategies that privilege what Gray (2013) describes as *representation as an end*

*in itself*. Foundational to such a discourse is a “press for more visibility and authentic representation” (p. 784). However, the efficacy of calls for more and better Black media representations must be understood within the context of “a conjuncture where the cultural politics of representation articulated by the American civil rights movement four decades ago is no longer productive in the same way” (p. 784). Thus, the stickiness of such archetypes such as the mammy, sambo, and Sapphire notwithstanding, it is reasonable to question if the concepts for appraising Black media representations that were birthed out of a very different social and political context remain adequate for understanding how audiences make meaning of Blackness.

Russworm (2012) attributes the surge in Black-produced television web series, many of which work to expand traditional televisual representations along the lines of gender and sexuality, to an uptick in discussions about Black media representations in and outside of the academy. She writes, “The evolution and explosion of Black web series is in large measure, the direct artistic response to conversations about representation that have finally become commonplace in college media studies classrooms, and, to some extent, in high school curriculums and in popular discourse” (para. 6). This work requires critiquing the representations of Blackness offered in older Black television shows, especially those that Black viewers have deemed classic, that continue to circulate throughout Black popular culture.

In the introduction to a special issue on *Friends*, Cobb, Ewen, and Hamad (2018) explain that the impetus for the issue stems from

our collective identification of the efficacy of *Friends* as a teaching text in our own classrooms—each of us experiencing it as the only television text from our respective youths that we can still rely upon as familiar, recognizable, and engaging to students (p. 3).

They note that “detailed textual knowledge of *Friends* seems to operate among them as a noteworthy form of popular cultural capital” (p. 3). However, the 1990s Black sitcoms referenced in this study have a similar function for scholars of color, representing a point of intersection between their fan object and their students. Although the shows are quite familiar to astute followers of Black popular culture, by critically engaging the texts in classroom settings, there is the potential to recast the shows as strange texts, “helping students investigate [the shows’] occluded meanings and effaced articulations” (Jacobs, 2005, p. 86).

### **Suggestions for future research**

I am often approached after presenting my research by non-Black scholars who express how 1990s Black sitcoms were foundational to their upbringing. White scholars, in particular, often express a strong affinity for the shows, citing them as important resources for developing forms of racial literacy. While my study focuses primarily on the experiences of Black millennials born in the United States, it is clear that 1990s Black sitcoms resonate with non-Black people and those residing outside of the United States. Havens’ (2013) work on the global syndication of Black television points to the cultural currency of 1990s sitcoms like *The Fresh Prince* and *The Cosby Show* internationally, particularly in Europe. In his study of how Kuwaiti youth understand race from *Fresh Prince*, Havens (2001) highlights some of the ways that 1990s Black sitcoms can contribute to problematic conceptions of Blackness for non-Blacks. He writes, “It may be that imported African-American sitcoms like *Fresh Prince*, which highlight the performative dimensions of black culture and identity, subtly work to reinforce potentially racist



attitudes among Kuwaitis” (p. 64). Such concerns echo Beltran’s (2007) trepidation about the utility of 1990s Black sitcoms for teaching racial diversity. Studying non-Black fans of 1990s black sitcoms would help answer some of the questions Hass (1998) poses in her article on white teenage fans of shows like *Sister, Sister*, *Smart Guy*, and *The Wayans Brothers*. She asks, “When today’s teen-agers grow into adults, will they continue this tolerance of diversity and pass it along to their children? Or will they, as their parents did, switch to ‘segregated’ television?” (p. 38). Exploring how 1990s Black sitcoms contribute to non-Black viewers’ understanding of Blackness could be a potentially rich direction for future research.

As I have demonstrated, understanding the almost inescapable intertextual relationships forged between 1990s Black sitcoms and other spheres of Black popular culture is paramount in any analysis of the pleasures Black audiences received from engaging a Black television heritage. In my attempts to chart out how participants’ engagement with the shows occurred within a larger popular culture milieu, I analyzed media texts that appropriated 1990s Black sitcoms to demonstrate the various ways that the shows pop up in the zeitgeist. One future direction is a more object-focused analysis looking at how the Black television heritage is engaged in sites such as fashion and music. A more sustained aesthetic analysis of the multitude of cultural texts through which 1990s Black sitcoms circulate would potentially generate a more expansive understanding of the shows’ affective resonance.

## REFERENCES

- Acham, C. (2013). The Cosby Show: representing race. In E. Thompson & J. Mittell (Eds.), *How to watch television* (pp. 103–111). New York: New York University Press.
- Adelson, A. (1991, February 7). How television is cultivating new ways of looking at Blacks. *The New York Times*, p. 19.
- Akomfrah, J. (1996). *Last Angel of History* [DVD]. Black Studio Film Collective.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). Happy objects. In G. J. Seigworth & M. Gregg (Eds.), *The affect theory reader* (pp. 29–51). Durham: Duke University Press.
- ahoward6382. (2011, April 11). How Lumet’s “The Wiz” became a black cult classic. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from <https://thegrio.com/2011/04/11/how-lumets-the-wiz-became-a-black-cult-classic/>
- Alterman, E. (1989, November 5). Black universities: in demand and in trouble. *The New York Times*, p. 61.
- Anderson, B. R. (2006). *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London; New York: Verso.
- Ang, I. (1985). *Watching Dallas: soap opera and melodramatic imagination*. Trans. Della Couling. London: Methuen.
- Archer, L., & Yamashita, H. (2003). Theorising inner-city masculinities: “race”, class, gender and education. *Gender & Education*, 15(2), 115–132.
- Ashe, B. D., Anderson, C., Neal, M. A., Shockley, E., & Weheliye, A. G. (2007). These-are-the-breaks: a roundtable discussion on teaching the post-soul aesthetic. *African American Review*, 41(4), 787–803.
- Bailey, M. (2010, March 14). They aren’t talking about me... Retrieved August 30, 2018, from <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/>
- Bailey, M. (2014, April 27). More on the origin of misogynoir. Retrieved April 27, 2018, from <http://moyazb.tumblr.com/post/84048113369/more-on-the-origin-of-misogynoir>
- Bailey, M. (2013). New terms of resistance: a response to Zenzele Isoke. *Souls*, 15(4), 341–343.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic TM: the politics of ambivalence in a brand culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Becker, R. (2006). Gay-themed television and the slumpy class: the affordable, multicultural politics of the Gay nineties. *Television & New Media*, 7(2), 184–215.
- Bell, D. (1989). After we’re gone: prudent speculations on America in a post-racial epoch. *Louis ULJ*, 34, 393.
- Beltran, M. (2007, February 23). How would Fresh Prince do it? teaching diversity to late ’80s babies. Retrieved from <http://flowtv.org/2007/02/how-would-fresh-prince-do-it-teaching-diversity-to-late-80s-babies/>
- Bennett, A. (2009). “Heritage rock”: rock music, representation and heritage discourse. *Poetics*, 37, 478–489.

- Berlant, L. (2007). Cruel optimism: on Marx, loss, and the senses. *New Formations*, 63, 33–51.
- Berlant, L. (2008). *Female complaint: the unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10(2), 141–163.
- Bird, S. E. (Ed.). (1996). *Dressing in feathers: the construction of the Indian in American popular culture*. Boulder: Westview.
- Bird, S. E. (2013). *The audience in everyday life: Living in a media world*. New York: Routledge.
- Bociurkiw, M. (2011). *Feeling Canadian: television, nationalism, and affect*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Bogle, D. (2001). *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on network television*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Bowen, S. (2016). *Bitches be like...: memes as black girl counter and disidentification tools* (Master's Thesis). Georgia State University.
- Bradley, R. N. (2014, June 16). The (magic) upper room: sonic pleasure politics in Southern hip hop. Retrieved July 30, 2018, from <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/06/16/the-magic-upper-room-sonic-pleasure-politics-in-southern-hip-hop/>
- Bristol, K. (2014, May 27). On Moya Bailey, misogynoir, and why both are important. Retrieved August 30, 2018, from <http://www.thevisibilityproject.com/2014/05/27/on-moya-bailey-misogynoir-and-why-both-are-important/>
- Brodie, J. (1992, September 7). Blacks to tube: get real. *Variety*, 348(7), 23, 27.
- Bush, C., & Johnson, P. (2018). Strange bedfellows: towards a theory of ambi-fandom. In R. Pande (Ed.), *Coloring outside the lines: an edited collection on race in fandom*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Childs, E. (2005). Looking behind the stereotypes of the “angry black woman”: an exploration of black women’s responses to interracial relationships. *Gender & Society*, 19(4), 544–561.
- Chang, J. (2005). *Can’t stop, won’t stop: a history of the hip-hop generation*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Cobb, S., Ewen, N., & Hamad, H. (2018). Friends reconsidered: cultural politics, intergenerationality, and afterlives. *Television & New Media*, 1–9.
- Conquergood, D. (2002). Performance studies: interventions and radical research. *The Drama Review*, 46(2), 145–156.
- Cooper, B. (2014, October 23). Clair Huxtable is dead: on slaying the Cosbys and making space for Liv, Analise, and Mary Jane. Retrieved August 31, 2018, from <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2014/10/23/clair-huxtable-is-dead-on-slaying-the-cosbys-and-making-space-for-liv-analise-and-mary-jane/>
- Corcoran, F. (1984). Television as ideological apparatus: the power and the pleasure. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 1(2), 131–145.

- Creeber, G. (2006). The joy of text?: Television and textual analysis. *Critical Studies in Television*, 1(1), 81–88.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Derrida, J. (1994). *Spectres of Marx*. (P. Kamuf, Trans.). London: Routledge.
- Derrida, J., & Stiegler, B. (2002). *Echographies of television: filmed interviews*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dhoest, A. (2007). Identifying with the nation: viewer memories of Flemish TV fiction. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(1), 55–73.
- Dhoest, A. (2015). Audience retrospection as a source of historiography: oral history interviews on early television experiences. *European Journal of Communication*, 30(1), 64–78.
- Diawara, M. (1999). Afro-Kitsch. In M. Joseph & J. Fink (Eds.), *Performing hybridity* (pp. 177–181). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dickson, L., & Marsh, K. (2008). The Love Jones cohort: a new face of the Black middle class. *Black Women, Gender, and Families*, 2(1), 84–105.
- Diduck, R. A. (2014). Time stand still: sampling scenes and slowing media. In D. Laderman & L. Westrup (Eds.), *Sampling media* (pp. 102–113). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Doane, M. A. (1990). Information, crisis, catastrophe. In P. Mellencamp (Ed.), *Logics of television essays in cultural criticism* (pp. 222–239). London: BFI Books.
- DuCille, A. (2001). The colour of class: classifying race in the popular imagination. *Social Identities*, 7(3), 409–419.
- Eco, U. (1985). Casablanca: cult movies and intertextual collage. *SubStance*, 14(2), 3–12.
- Eco, U. (1994). *Six walks in the fictional woods*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Edgar, A., & Sedgwick, P. (Eds.). (1999). *Key concepts in cultural theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107–115.
- Eshun, K. (1998). *More brilliant than the sun: adventures in sonic fiction*. London: Quartet Books.
- Eshun, K. (2013). Drexciya as spectre. In A. Farquharson & M. Clark (Eds.), *Aquatopia: the imaginary of the ocean deep* (pp. 138–146). London: Tate.
- Espenson, J. (2010). Playing hard to “get”—how to write cult TV. In S. Abbott (Ed.), *The cult TV book* (pp. 45–53). London: I.B Tauris.
- Evans, E. E. (2012, March 13). 11 Black cult classics of the 1990s. Retrieved August 30, 2018, from <https://www.theroot.com/11-black-cult-classics-of-the-1990s-1790868158>
- Farley, C. J. (1991, December 2). Racial identity crisis: middle-class blacks struggle to maintain cultural awareness. *USA Today*, p. 1D.
- Feuer, J. (1992). Genre study and television. In R. C. Allen (Ed.), *Channels of discourse, reassembled: television and contemporary criticism* (pp. 138–159). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Fisher, M. (2014). *Ghosts of my life: writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures*. Alresford: Zero Books.
- Fisher-Keller, J. (1997). Everyday learning about identities among young adolescents in television culture. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 28(4), 467–492.
- Fiske, J. (1987). *Television culture*. London: Methuen.
- Fiske, J. (1989). Moments of television: neither the text nor the audience. In E. Seiter, H. Borchers, G. Kreuzner, & G. Warth (Eds.), *Remote control: television, audiences, and cultural power* (pp. 56–78). New York: Routledge.
- Fiske, J. (1990). Ethnosemiotics: some personal and theoretical reflections. *Cultural Studies*, 4(1), 85–99.
- Fiske, J. (1992). The cultural economy of fandom. In L. A. Lewis (Ed.), *The adoring audience: fan culture and popular media* (pp. 30–49). London: Routledge.
- Fleetwood, N. R. (2011). *Troubling vision: performance, visibility, and blackness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fuller, J. (2012). Gimme a Break! and the limits of the modern mammy. In B. E. Smith-Shomade (Ed.), *Watching while black: centering the television of black audiences* (pp. 105–120). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Garner, R. P. (2016). “The series that changed television”?: Twin Peaks, “classic” status, and temporal capital. *Cinema Journal*, 55(3), 137–142.
- George, N. (1998). *Hip hop America*. New York: Penguin.
- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147–166.
- Gillespie, M. (1992). *TV talk in a London Punjabi peer culture* (Dissertation). Brunel University.
- Gillespie, M. (1995). *Television, ethnicity, and cultural change*. London: Routledge.
- Gilroy, A. (2015). Watching Dallas again I: Doing retro audience research. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 19.
- Givens, J. R. (2016). The invisible tax: exploring Black student engagement at historically white institutions. *Berkeley Review of Education*, 6(1), 55–78.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith, Eds.). New York: International Publishers.
- Gray, H. (1989). Television, black Americans and the American Dream. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 6, 376–386.
- Gray, H. (1995). *Watching race: television and the struggle for blackness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gray, H. (2005). *Cultural moves: African Americans and the politics of representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gray, H. (2013). Subject(ed) to recognition. *American Quarterly*, 65(4), 771–798.
- Gray, H. (2015). The feel of life: resonance, race, and representation. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1108–1119.

- Gray, J. (2003). New audiences, new textualities: anti-fans and non-fans. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6(1), 64–81.
- Gray, J. (2006). *Watching with The Simpsons: television, parody, and intertextuality*. London: Routledge.
- Gray, J. (2008). *Television entertainment*. New York: Routledge.
- Gray, J. (2010). *Show sold separately: promos, spoilers, and other media paratexts*. New York: New York University Press.
- Griffin, H. (2011). Never, sometimes, always: the multiple temporalities of “post-race” discourse in convergence television narrative. *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 9, 235–250.
- Guerrero, L. A. (2013). Single black female: representing the modern black woman in Living Single. In D. Leonard & L. A. Guerrero (Eds.), *African Americans on television: race-ing for ratings* (pp. 177–190). Santa Barbara: Praeger.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough?: an experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82.
- Haggins, B. L. (1999). There’s no place like home: the American dream, African-American identity, and the situation comedy. *The Velvet Light Trap*, 43, 23–36.
- Haggins, B. L. (2000). *The American dream...by any means necessary: television lay theories from urban suburbia* (Dissertation). University of California, Los Angeles.
- Hall, S. (2000). Encoding/decoding. In P. Marris & S. Thornham (Eds.), *Media studies: a reader* (2nd ed, pp. 51–61). New York: New York University Press.
- Harris, S. C. (2016, February 25). Misogynoir and Black women’s unpaid emotional labor. Retrieved August 30, 2018, from <http://www.clydefitchreport.com/2016/02/black-women-misogynoir-communication/>
- Hass, N. (1998, February 22). A new generation is seeing beyond color. *New York Times*, pp. 38, 42.
- Hatcher, E. D. (1993, April). You go guy!—at 27-years-old, Martin Lawrence has the world laughing to his naughty-but-nice brand of hip-hop humor. *The Source*, 46.
- Havens, T. (2001). Subtitling rap: appropriating The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air for youthful identity formation in Kuwait. *International Communication Gazette*, 63(1), 57–72.
- Havens, T. (2013). *Black television travels: African American media around the globe*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hill, M. L. (2009). Bringing back sweet (and not so sweet) memories: the cultural politics of memory, hip-hop, and generational identities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(4), 355–377.
- Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Hill Collins, P. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.

- Hogarty, J. (2015). *The rhythm of our lives: popular music and the cultural memory in the age of the Internet and retro culture* (Dissertation). National University of Ireland Maynooth.
- Holdsworth, A. (2008). "Television Resurrections": television and memory. *Cinema Journal*, 47(3), 137–144.
- Hunt, D. M. (Ed.). (2005). *Channeling blackness: studies on television and race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hunter, M., & Soto, K. (2009). Women of color in hip hop: the pornographic gaze. *Race, Gender & Class*, 16(1-2), 170–191.
- Inniss, L. B., & Feagin, J. R. (1995). The Cosby Show: the view from the Black middle class. *Journal of Black Studies*, 25(6), 692–711.
- Iton, R. (2010). *In search of the Black fantastic: politics and popular culture in the post-civil rights era*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, J. L. (2005). *Real Black: adventures in racial sincerity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jackson, L. M. (2014, August 28). Memes and misogynoir. Retrieved August 30, 2018, from <https://www.theawl.com/2014/08/memes-and-misogynoir/>
- Jacobs, W. R. (2005). *Speaking the lower frequencies: students and media literacy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- James, A. (2012). Seeking the analytic imagination: reflections on the process of interpreting qualitative data. *Qualitative Research*, 13(5), 562–577.
- Jayemanne, D. (2003). Spielraum: games, art, and cyberspace. Presented at the Melbourne International Digital Arts and Culture Conference.
- Jenkins, H. (2011). Why Fiske still matters. Introduction to Fiske, J., *Reading the popular* (pp. xii – xxxviii). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2014). Fandom studies as I see it. *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 2(2), 89–109.
- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable media*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jermyn, D. (2010). *Prime Suspect*. London: BFI Books.
- Johnson, E. P. (2003). *Appropriating Blackness: performance and the politics of authenticity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Joyner, J. (n.d.). Why "Ready Player One" and its erasure of Black culture is harmful. Retrieved August 31, 2018, from <http://www.okayplayer.com/originals/ready-player-one-black-culture-erasure-harmful-opinion.html>
- Kalviknes Bore, I.L. (2012). Focus group research and TV comedy audiences. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 9(2), 3–22.
- Keightley, E. (2010). Remembering research: memory and methodology in the social sciences. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13(1), 55–70.
- Keightley, E., & Pickering, M. (2006). For the record: popular music and photography as technologies of memory. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(2), 149–165.

- Kelly, B. T. (2003). Focus group interviews. In F. K. Stage & K. Manning (Eds.), *Research in the college context: approaches and methods* (pp. 49–62). New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2005). Toward critical media literacy: core concepts, debates, organizations, and policy. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 26(3), 369–386.
- King, J. (2007). The sound of velvet melting: the power of “vibe” in the music of Roberta Flack. In E. Weisbard (Ed.), *Listen again: a momentary history of pop music* (pp. 172–199). Durham: Duke University Press.
- King, K. L. (2013). *Using television: how undergraduate female students utilize television as a cultural resource* (Dissertation). University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY.
- Kitwana, B. (2002). *The hip hop generation: young blacks and the crisis in African American culture*. New York: Basic Civitas Books.
- Klinger, B. (2006). *Beyond the multiplex: cinema, new technologies, and the home*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kompare, D. (2002). I’ve seen this one before: the construction of “classic TV” on cable television. In J. Thumin (Ed.), *Small screen, big ideas* (pp. 20–34). London: I.B Tauris.
- Kompare, D. (2005). *Rerun nation: how repeats invented American television*. New York: Routledge.
- Kompare, D. (2010). Reruns 2.0: revising repetition for multiplatform television distribution. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 38(2), 79–83.
- Kramp, L. (2007). The changing role of television in the museum. *Spectator*, 27(1), 48–57.
- Kreisinger, E. (2015). Remixing the remix. In E. Navas, O. Gallagher, & xtine burrough (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to remix studies* (pp. 480–486). New York: Routledge.
- Lakoff, R. (1990). The grooves of academe. In *Talking power: the politics of language in our lives* (pp. 141–160). New York: Basic Books.
- Langer, J. (1981). Television’s “personality system.” *Media, Culture & Society*, 4, 351–365.
- Laughey, D. (2006). *Music and youth culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Leath, S., & Chavous, T. (2017). “We really protested”: the influence of sociopolitical beliefs, political self-efficacy, and campus racial climate on civic engagement among Black college students attending predominantly white institutions. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 86(3), 220–237.
- Leech, N. L., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2007). An array of qualitative data analysis tools: a call for data analysis triangulation. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 22(4), 557–584.
- Le Guern, P. (2004). Toward a constructivist approach to media cults. In S. Gwenllian-Jones & R.E. Pearson (Eds.), *Cult television* (pp. 3–25). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lentz, K. M. (2000). Quality versus relevance: feminism, race, and the politics of the sign in 1970s. *Camera Obscura*, 15(1), 44–93.
- Leonardo, Z. (2013). *Race frameworks: a multidimensional theory of racism and education*. New York: Teachers College Press.



- Levine, E., & Parks, L. (2007). Introduction. In E. Levine & L. Parks (Eds.), *Undead TV: essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (pp. 1–15). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lewis, H. R. (2014). An examination of Kanye West’s higher education trilogy. In J. Bailey (Ed.), *The cultural impact of Kanye West* (pp. 65–77). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lindsey, T. B. (2013). “One time for my girls”: african-american girlhood, empowerment, and popular visual culture. *Journal of African American Studies*, 17, 22–34.
- Lordi, E. J. (2013). *Black resonance*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Lotz, A. D. (2005). Segregated sitcoms: institutional causes of disparity among Black and white comedy images and audiences. In M. M. Dalton & L. R. Linder (Eds.), *The sitcom reader: America viewed and skewed* (pp. 139–150). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lovink, G. (2000, July 10). An interview with Kodwo Eshun. Retrieved September 1, 2018, from <http://v2.nl/archive/articles/an-interview-with-kodwo-eshun>
- Malcolm, S. (2008, August 13). Belly oral history. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from <http://king-mag.com/belly-oral-history/>
- Marriott, D. (2007). 15 Black Cultural Studies. *Year’s Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, 15(1), 277–286.
- Mask, M. L. (2000). Buppy love in an urban world. *Cineaste*, 25(2), 41–45.
- Mathijs, E., & Sexton, J. (2012). *Cult cinema: an introduction*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- McKee, A. (2001). A beginner’s guide to textual analysis. *Metro Magazine*, 138–149.
- McKee, A. (2012). Australian television, popular memory and suburbia. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15(3), 303–314.
- McKissack Jr, F. L. (1997, February). The problem with Black TV. *The Progressive*, 61(2), 38–40.
- Means Coleman, R. (1998). *African American viewers and the Black situation comedy: situating racial humor*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Means Coleman, R. (2011). “Roll up your sleeves!”: Black women, black feminism in Feminist Media Studies. *Feminist Media Studies*, 11(1), 35–41.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York: Grove Press.
- Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22, 129–152.
- Morley, D. (2005). *Television audiences and cultural studies*. London: Routledge.
- Moseley, R., & Wheatley, H. (2008). Is archiving a feminist issue?: historical research and the past, present, and future of television studies. *Cinema Journal*, 47(3), 152–158.
- Ndukwe, N. (2018, February 24). Top 5 Black TV shows that will give you 90s nostalgia. Retrieved August 31, 2018, from <https://www.top5.com/black-tv-shows-90s-nostalgia/>
- Nelson, J. (1997). *Straight, no chaser: how I became a grown-up black woman*. New York: Putnam Adult.
- Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: the hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(4), 327–344.

- Ogbu, J. U., & Simons, H. D. (1998). Voluntary and involuntary minorities: a cultural-ecological theory of school performance with some implications for education. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 29(2), 155–188.
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Dickinson, W. B., Leech, N. L., & Zoran, A. G. (2009). A qualitative framework for collecting and analyzing data in focus group research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(3), 1–21.
- O’Sullivan, T. (1994). Nostalgia, out-takes and candid video: some tendencies in the flow of modern British television. *Critical Survey*, 6(2), 251–258.
- Owen, F. (1994, April). Got to be real. *Vibe*, 2(3), 72–76.
- Paasonen, S. (2011). *Carnal resonance: affect and online pornography*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Padua, D. (2017). *The family “playlist”: popular music, age, and identity* (Dissertation). Queensland University of Technology, Australia.
- Palmer, T. (2012, October 16). Who you calling ratchet? Retrieved from <https://www.theroot.com/who-you-calling-ratchet-1790893739>
- Pande, R. (2018). Who do you mean by “fan”? decolonizing media fandom identity. In P. Booth (Ed.), *A companion to media fandom and fan studies* (pp. 319–332). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Pareles, J. (1990, January 14). Rap moves to television’s beat. *The New York Times*, p. H1.
- Parham, M. (2009). *Haunting and displacement in African American literature and culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Patterson, E. (2016). The Golden Girls Live: residual television texts, participatory culture, and queering TV heritage through drag. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(5), 838–851.
- Pearson, R. E. (2004). “Bright particular star”: Patrick Stewart, Jean-Luc Picard, and cult television. In S. Gwenllian-Jones & R. E. Pearson (Eds.), *Cult television* (pp. 61–82). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Perry, A. R., Smith, S. E., & Brooms, D. R. (2014). “You ain’t no Denzel”: African American men’s use of popular culture to narrate and understand marriage and romantic relationships. *Journal of African American Studies*, 18, 485–497.
- Petrone, K. (2014). *How young adults make meaning of their family intergenerational solidarity through the use of music* (Dissertation). Antioch University New England.
- Prince, S. (2018). *A year in the country: wandering through spectral fields*. A Year in The Country.
- Rachael. (2011, September 18). How to be a fan of problematic things. Retrieved May 11, 2015, from <http://www.socialjusticeleague.net/2011/09/how-to-be-a-fan-of-problematic-things/>
- Raj, R. L., Wale, M., Spoellmink, J.-N., Dania, A., & Gilroy, A. (2015). Watching Dallas again 2: locating viewing pleasures--an audience study of the new Dallas. *Transformative Works and Culture*, 19.
- Ramirez, R. (2014, January 27). New hip-hop dance craze: “Drop that #NaeNae.” Retrieved September 18, 2015, from <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/5885484/new-hip-hop-dance-craze-drop-that-naenae>

- Reynolds, S. (1993, December 5). Perils of loving old records too much. *The New York Times*, p. H38.
- Reynolds, S. (2011). *Retromania: pop culture's addiction to its own past*. New York: Faber and Faber.
- Riggs, M. T. (1991). *Color Adjustment*. California Newsreel.
- Roberts, R. A., Bell, L. A., & Murphy, B. (2008). Flipping the script: analyzing youth talk about race and racism. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 39(3), 334–354.
- Rollock, N., Gilborn, D., Vincent, C., & Ball, S. J. (2011). The public identities of the Black middle classes: managing race in public spaces. *Sociology*, 45(6), 1078–1093.
- Rollock, N., Vincent, C., Gilborn, D., & Bell, S. (2013). "Middle class by profession": class status and identification amongst the Black middle classes. *Ethnicities*, 13(3), 253–275.
- Rose, T. (1994). *Black noise: rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Russworm, T. M. (2012, February 27). Now watching: Black web series and the promised land of new media. Retrieved May 4, 2016, from <http://www.flowjournal.org/2012/02/now-watching-black-web-series/>
- Schneider, R. (2011). *Performing remains: art and war in times of theatrical reenactment*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Schulze, H. (2013). Adventures in sonic fiction: a heuristic for sound studies. *Journal of Sonic Studies*, 4(1).
- Sears, D. O. (1986). College sophomores in the laboratory: influences of a narrow data base on social psychology's view of human nature. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(3), 515–530.
- Seiter, E., Borchers, H., Kreutzner, G., & Warth, G. (Eds.). (1989). *Remote control: television, audiences, and cultural power*. New York: Routledge.
- Sexton, J. (2012). Weird Britain in exile. Ghost Box, hauntology, and alternative heritage. *Popular Music and Society*, 35(4), 561–584.
- Shahjahan, R. A. (2015). Being 'lazy' and slowing down: toward decolonizing time, our body, and pedagogy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(5), 488–501.
- Sharpley-Whiting, T. D. (1999). *Black Venus: sexualized savages, primal fears, and primitive narratives in French*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Simioju. (2012, August 15). The original 1976 "Sparkle" cast: Where are they now? Retrieved April 3, 2018, from <https://thegrio.com/2012/08/15/the-original-1976-sparkle-cast-where-are-they-now/>
- Smith, N. (2012). Parenthood and the transfer of capital in the Northern soul scene. In A. Bennett & P. Hodkinson (Eds.), *Ageing and youth culture: music, style and identity* (pp. 159–178). London: Berg.
- Smith-Shomade, B. E. (2012). Introduction: I see Black people. In B. E. Smith-Shomade (Ed.), *Watching while black: centering the television of black audiences* (pp. 1–15). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

- Smithson, J. (2000). Using and analysing focus groups: limitations and possibilities. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 3(2), 103–119.
- Spence, L. (2005). *Watching daytime soap operas: the power of pleasure*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Spigel, L. (1995). From the dark ages to the golden age: women's memories and television reruns. *Screen*, 36(1), 16–33.
- Spigel, L. (2001). *Welcome to the dreamhouse: popular media and postwar suburbs*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Spigel, L. (2010). Our TV heritage: television, the archive, and the reasons for preservation. In J. Wasko (Ed.), *A companion to television* (pp. 67–99). West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing.
- Spigel, L. (2013). Postfeminist nostalgia for a prefeminist future. *Screen*, 54(2), 270–278.
- Spigel, L., & Jenkins, H. (1991). Same Bat channel/Different Bat times: mass culture and popular memory. In R. E. Pearson & W. Uricchio (Eds.), *The many lives of the Batman: critical approaches to a superhero and his media* (pp. 117–148). New York: Routledge.
- Springer, K. (2007). Divas, evil black bitches, and bitter black women: African American women in postfeminist and post-civil-rights popular culture. In Y. Tasker & D. Negra (Eds.), *Interrogating postfeminism: gender and the politics of popular culture* (pp. 249–276). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Squires, C., & Haggins, B. (2012). Regarding Black audiences: qualitative approaches to studying media consumption. In J. S. Jackson, C. H. Caldwell, & S. L. Sellers (Eds.), *Researching black communities: a methodological guide* (pp. 289–308). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Stallings, L.H. (2009). Punked for life: Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* and radical black masculinities. *African American Review*, 43(1), 99–116.
- Stallings, L.H. (2013). Hip hop and the black ratchet imagination. *Palimpsest*, 2(2), 135–139.
- Stanfill, M. (2011). Doing fandom, (mis)doing whiteness: heteronormativity, racialization, and the discursive construction of fandom. *Transformative Works and Culture*, 8.
- Stanfill, M. (2018). The unbearable whiteness of fandom and fan studies. In P. Booth (Ed.), *A companion to media fandom and fan studies* (pp. 305–317). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Stein, L. E. (2015). *Millennial fandom: television audiences in the transmedia age*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Steinskog, E. (2018). *Afrofuturism and Black sound studies: culture, technology, and things to come*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stewart, D.L. (2015). Know your role: Black college students, racial identity, and performance. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28(2), 238–258.
- Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N., & Rook, D. W. (2007). *Focus groups: theory and practice* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Swink, R. S. (2017). Lemony Liz and likable Leslie: audience understandings of feminism, comedy, and gender in women-led comedies. *Feminist Media Studies*, 17(1), 14–28.

- Tatum, B. D. (2003). *“Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?”: and other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books.
- Thompson, E., & Mittell, J. (2013). Introduction: an owner’s manual for television. In E. Thompson & J. Mittell (Eds.), *How to watch television* (pp. 1–9). New York: New York University Press.
- Tillery, A. (2012, August 17). 4 classic black films you must see. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from <http://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/4-classic-black-films-you-must-see-477>
- Tinic, S. (2009, June 12). No rerun nation: Canadian television and cultural amnesia. Retrieved August 16, 2018, from <http://www.flowjournal.org/2009/06/no-rerun-nation-canadian-television-and-cultural-amnesia-serra-tinic-university-of-alberta/>
- Uricchio, W. (2010). TV as time machine: television’s changing heterochronic regimes and the production of history. In J. Gripsrud (Ed.), *Relocating television: television in the digital context* (pp. 27–40). London: Routledge.
- Vaughn, S., Schumm, J. S., & Sinagub, J. (1996). *Focus group interviews in education and psychology*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Venezia, T. (2013). Utopia loops, ghost legacies. *Alluvium*, 2(4).
- Vieira de Oliveira, P. J.S. (2016). Design at the Earview: decolonizing speculative design through sonic fiction. *Design Issues*, 32(2), 43–52.
- VH1. (2015, February 20). Black cult classic films streaming on Netflix. Retrieved August 30, 2018, from <http://www.vh1.com/news/11944/black-cult-classic-films-streaming-on-netflix/>
- VH1. (2017, September 15). Martin Lawrence is hip hop. Retrieved August 30, 2018, from <http://www.vh1.com/video-clips/a4igls/hip-hop-honors-the-90-s-game-changers-martin-lawrence-is-hip-hop>
- Vognar, T. (2011). This ain’t funny so don’t you dare laugh: navigating the interplay of hip-hop and humor. *Transition*, (104), 102–120.
- Walker, A. (1983). *In search of our mother’s gardens: womanist prose*. Orlando: Harcourt.
- Wanzo, R. (2015). African American acafandom and other strangers: New genealogies of fan studies. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 20.
- Warner, K. (2015). ABC’s Scandal and black women’s fandom. In E. Levine (Ed.), *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn* (pp. 32–50). Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Warner, K. J. (2015). They gon’ think you loud regardless: ratchetness, reality television, and black womanhood. *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 30(1), 129–153.
- Washington, I. (1996, June). For a black man, acting can be a drag. *Essence*, 27(2), 34.
- Watkins, S. C. (1998). *Representing: hip hop culture and the production of Black cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Weheliye, A. (2001). Keepin’ it (un)real: perusing the boundaries of hip hop culture. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 1(2), 291–310.
- Weispenning, J. (2003). Cultural functions of reruns: time, memory, and television. *Journal of Communication*, 53(1), 165–176.

- Whatley Matabane, P., & Merritt, B. (2014). Media use, gender, and African American college attendance: The Cosby Effect. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 25(4), 452–471.
- Wilcox, R. V. (1999). There will never be a “very special” Buffy: Buffy and the monsters of teen life. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 27(2), 16–23.
- Wildemuth, B., & Wilkins Jordan, M. (2009). Focus groups. In *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science* (pp. 242–255). Westport: Libraries Unlimited.
- Williams, B. (2017, June 6). “Juice” director says we can’t let future generations sleep on classic Black films. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/juice-25th-anniversary-director-ernest-r-dickerson\\_us\\_59383781e4b0c5a35c9b33e7](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/juice-25th-anniversary-director-ernest-r-dickerson_us_59383781e4b0c5a35c9b33e7)
- Williams, B., & Emani, G. (2014, October 21). How to make it as a black sitcom: be careful how you talk about race. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/21/black-sitcom-black-ish\\_n\\_6002850.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/21/black-sitcom-black-ish_n_6002850.html)
- Williams, R. (1975). *Television: technology and cultural form*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Williams, R. (2006). Base and superstructure in Marxist cultural theory. In M. G. Durham & D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies keywords* (2nd Edition, pp. 130–143). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Williams, R. (2011). “This is the night TV died”: television post-object fandom and the demise of The West Wing. *Popular Communication*, 9(4), 266–279.
- Wineburg, S., Mosborg, S., Porat, D., & Duncan, A. (2007). Forrest Gump and the future of teaching the past. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89(3), 168–177.
- Wood, H., & Taylor, L. (2008). Feeling sentimental about television and audiences. *Cinema Journal*, 47(3), 144–151.
- Wood, H. (2009). *Talking with television: women, talk shows, and modern self-reflexivity*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital?: a critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.
- Yosso, T. J., Smith, W. A., Ceja, M., & Solorzano, D. G. (2009). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate for Latina/o undergraduates. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(4), 659–690.
- Zaborowski, R., & Dhaenens, F. (2016). Old topics, old approaches? “Reception” in television studies and music studies. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 13(1), 446–461.
- Zook, K. B. (1995). *How I became the prince of a town called Bel-Air: nationalist desire in black television* (Dissertation). University of California, Santa Cruz.
- Zook, K. B. (1999). *Color by Fox: the Fox network and the revolution in black television*. Oxford; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.
- Zuberi, N. (2007). Is This the Future? Black Music and Technology Discourse. *Science Fiction Studies*, 34(2, Afrofuturism), 283–300.