UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Scratchin' and Survivin':

Hustle Economics, Gender Politics, and Creative Dissent in the Black Sitcoms of Tandem Productions

(1972-1975)

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Film and Television

by

Adrien Phillip Sebro

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Adrien Phillip Sebro

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

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Professor Ellen Scott, Chair

"*Scratchin' and Survivin*': Agency and Resilience through Hustle Economics, Gender, and Dissent in the Black Sitcoms of Tandem Productions (1972-1975) explores the production history and the representation of racial identity formation in the all-Black casted sitcoms of Tandem Productions: *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977), *Good Times* (1974-1979), and *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). The popularity of these sitcoms, and the numerous themes discussed throughout the series, show a compelling shift in viewing styles and influences during the 1970s. The production of these sitcoms called for various forms of creative agency and labor resilience that transformed the television industry and I wish to call attention to the Black artists, writers, etc. who were all a part of these transformative acts.

My dissertation puts the production history of Tandem Productions into conversation with textual analyses of particular episodes of its Black sitcoms, not only to discuss specific themes (such as, "hustle economics," gender, and dissent) that addressed the state of Black Americans in the 1970s, but to chronicle the agency and resilience of Tandem's Black artists,

and to reveal shifts in the practices and content of the larger American television industry. Through my analyses, I argue that we must read the representations of the Black community in these sitcoms beyond the often-popular discussions of their "stereotyping" and "buffoonery." Rather, it is crucial to read them from the perspective of the intertextual narratives of the show's stars and creative talent who represented Black agency and resilience within an established racial and social order, and to read them as a response to temporal national politics. This project attempts to better understand and provide dimension on the impact that these sitcoms had in popular culture and on television. Particularly, the research draws attention to the artistic struggles between Black actors, Black writers, and Tandem Productions executives, in order to illuminate the complex history of an independent production company heralded for its advances in depicting Black American life in a comedic fashion. The dissertation uses the personal papers of Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin, and examines production documents and budgets, viewer letters, contracts, interviews, original scripts, important events in national and Black politics, and popular magazine coverage of the shows with two goals: first, to create a history that better addresses Tandem Production's politics of representation; and second, to discuss why and how the company initiated and deployed the rise of Black cultural representation in network sitcoms.

In order to address a production history of Tandem in conversation with analyses of particular episodes of its Black sitcoms, I also research the writers of particular episodes of the series; *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. I focused particularly on Black writers who used their primetime platform to respond to national, social, and political issues. The main episodic themes that I will be following through these three Black sitcoms are: "hustle economics" (the specifically racialized ways in which Black community members engage with infor-

mal or sometimes illegal economies), Black gender politics (the historical and cultural traditions that construct the formation of gender roles in Black families), Black artist's dissent with White executives, and protest (engagement with topical political issues, electoral politics, and Black activism). My aim is to understand the politics of representation of Tandem as a whole and how the Black artists involved with each show added to the company's production culture and to demonstrate that *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons* are all important to the developmental arc of racial formation and Blackness in network television.

The dissertation of Adrien Phillip Sebro is approved.

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DEDICATION

To JNF

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This work wouldn't be possible without your legacy of resilience, I hope I made you proud.

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Introduction

I remember clearly the first time I was introduced to 1970's Black sitcoms. In 2005, when I was a sophomore in high school, my father complained that everything my siblings and I watched on television had no context. Each show was simply a boring recreation of television's past. He said to us, "Watch this if you want to see some quality television." "This" was a DVD of the situational comedy (or sitcom) *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977). The first episode I ever saw left me somewhat confused because of the historical references and use of Black vernacular. Nonetheless, I was engaged and tried to understand what exactly the main character, Fred Sanford, was saying about Black American culture in the 1970s and how he was saying it. The scene takes place in a courthouse in Los Angeles, California. A middle-aged Black man (Lamont Sanford) is challenging a twenty-five-dollar traffic ticket that he believes was given to him unlawfully as the result of the prejudice of a White police officer. Unable to afford a lawyer the Black man attempts to represent himself in court and at the first sight of struggle, his father (Fred Sanford), a senior man in an old suit rises to boastfully shout, "Your Honor, I am his counsel!" Now assuming the position of the lawyer, the senior addresses the White officer and his prejudice. He stands over the officer sternly and asks, "What do you got against Black drivers?" The courthouse audience (all Black) yells in support of the question. Maintaining order, the judge (himself a Black man) pounds his gavel and shouts, "Stick to the matter at hand!" In response, the senior states, "That's what's wrong with the court, a Black man ain't got no chance around here," but, without hesitation, the judge counters, "I'm Black." Dismissive, the senior says, "Well you the judge, that don't count." As the courthouse audience stands to applaud, the judge is again forced to regain order of the courtroom. The senior Sanford then reapproaches the officer asking why he doesn't arrest White drivers, when the officer claims that

he does, the senior boastfully states, "Well where are they? Look at all these Niggas in here… Look around here, there's enough Niggas in here to make a Tarzan movie!" The senior asserts that a courtroom is where one goes to get justice and that he "Demands justice!"[1]

I later came to realize that, as an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago, my father had quickly grasped many elements of Black American culture through the medium of television. To be abreast of Black popular culture, he consistently watched Black television sitcoms in particular. My viewing of "Fred Sanford Legal Eagle" came at an interesting time in my life when I was witnessing many of the young Black men that I had grown up with having to face the criminal justice system. Watching this episode at the time, I asked myself: why must Fred demand justice? How is it that all these Black characters are acting in unison? Why do they not trust the judicial system? From then on, I became interested in investigating the sometimes broad and sometimes subtle political meanings that inform the comedy of Black sitcoms and how these translate to the realities of being Black and living in America. Since that first viewing of *Sanford and Son*, I realized that television in general and Black sitcoms in particular are much more than entertainment; they are windows through which to see the history, culture, and the agency of Black performance both in real life and on screen.

My dissertation thus explores a production history and the representation of racial and cultural formation in the all-Black casted sitcoms of Tandem Productions: *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977), *Good Times* (1974-1979), and *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985).[2] With close attention

[1] *Sanford and* Son, Season 3 Episode 15 "Fred Sanford Legal Eagle," 01/11/1974.

[2] I use the term "Black" throughout as a means of identifying members of the larger African Diaspora. I steer away from the term "African-American" commonly used by other scholars primarily because I do not wish to assume that these actors and artists defined themselves as "African American," and racial markers of members of this Diaspora have continued to change through the century due to various political influences and censuses. "Black" is a term that best encompasses a range of members of this Diaspora.

to themes such as socioeconomics, gender, religion, and politics, the sitcoms of Tandem had their own distinct style in depicting Black American life on screen. By placing the production history and culture of Tandem into conversation with textual analyses of particular episodes of its Black sitcoms, I not only discuss themes that addressed the state of Black Americans in the 1970's, but also reveal shifts in the practices and content of the larger American television industry. The reoccurring themes throughout Tandem's Black sitcoms show a scantly discussed history of agency and resilience from the Black writers and actors at Tandem. I define agency as the exerting of power and influence. I use the term resilience to describe the mental and emotional capacity to make one's way through difficult times. I believe that both of these terms define the reality of Tandem's Black artists. As their influence continued to grow many of them obtained the agency to make transformative changes at Tandem. Yet, in a largely White-dominated space like television, resilience was necessary for Black artists at Tandem who were forced to contend with a system that often silenced them. An important research question that my dissertation investigates is: What are the contributions of the Black actors and writers at Tandem Productions to the representation of Black culture in situation comedies, the television industry at large, and American society? My working hypotheses and arguments are that the representations of Black culture in Tandem's all-Black sitcoms are emblematic of economic and infrastructure shifts within the television industry in the 1970's. Those onscreen representations are also responsive to 1970s national politics through narratives of Black agency and resilience within an established but increasingly contested and discriminatory racial and social order—both critical elements in the rise of Black cultural representation in network sitcoms.

Tandem Productions was founded in 1958 by television director Bud Yorkin and television writer Norman Lear, who are both White men. As an independent film and television pro-

duction company, Tandem's early years involved limited production success in variety television and films such as; *Henry Fonda and the Family* (1966), *An Evening with Carol Channing* (1966), *Come Blow Your Horn* (1963), and *Divorce American Style* (1967). It was not until they focused their attention on situational comedy that the company reached the apex of their fame. To be clear, Tandem was not the only independent production company of this moment doing transformative work. Is it important to note that Mary Tyler Moore's MTM Enterprises and Tandem Productions, which both dealt with social issues, differed in their treatment of race. MTM is an important counterpart and counterpoint to Tandem. MTM received more prestige and became the emblem of quality television among critics, while Tandem was considered crass, stand-up adjacent, and not nearly as literate. But MTM also continued to marginalize Black people and to avoid putting forward hot button racial issues through the voice and perspective of centralized Black protagonists. Tandem put Blackness front and center. Lear believes that through their work that "television and the American culture had been 'radicalized' overnight."[3] Meaning that before his shows, Lear believes that television lacked transformative content that dealt with societal issues. It is important to mention, that this dissertation's focus on the sitcom genre is deliberate. The sitcom genre, because it is television's most basic format, has often been misread. Horace Newcomb finds the genre "limited in its capacity for ambiguity, developments and the ability to challenge our values."[4] However, I agree with David Marc and Jane Feuer, in that certain authors can make the sitcom form into social satire and that the sitcom genre developed over time into the direction of the continuing serial.[5]

[3] Lear, Norman. *Even This I Get to* Experience, Penguin Press, 2014, 239.
[4] Feuer, Jane, "Genre Study and Television" in Ed. Robert C. Allen *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*. Routledge, 2005, p. 110.
[5] Ibid.

In order to analyze Black visual content, it is important to first ask, what is Black popular culture and how does it relate to the lived reality of Black citizens? Black popular culture has been a productive space that has introduced an element of difference in the complex struggle over cultural hegemony. Stuart Hall's "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?" helps us to understand this further.[6] As the United States emerged as a world power and center for cultural circulation, so did Black popular culture.[7] This emergence marks a "displacement and hegemonic shift in the definition of culture" moving away from the European model of the high culture aesthetic.[8] Black popular culture, as I look at it, also marks an emergence of decolonized sensibilities and minds coupled with the impact of civil rights and Black struggles in the United States, specifically. This postmodern idea of culture betrays an extreme interest in "differences: a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic, 'a bit of the other.'"[9] Cultural politics of difference, the struggles around difference, the production of new identities, and the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage all demonstrate how Black popular culture is actually a struggle over cultural hegemony. This struggle is being waged at the sites of reception through various audience perspectives a well as through the various production politics at play when contending with the development of Black sitcoms. Understanding Hall's Black popular culture is vital to this project because it aids in our understanding of how television in general and Tandem Productions specifically, aims to represent racial difference within the confines of racial hegemony. Of course, the rise in Black sitcoms in the 1970's offers an important shift

[6] Hall, Stuart. "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?" *Social Justice* Vol. 20, No. 1/2 (51-52), Rethinking Race (Spring-Summer 1993), pp.104-114.

[7] Ibid., 104.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 105.

from the televisual norm by offering various depictions of Black life being screened nationwide; however, control of the media was still in the hands of White elites, it still worked to set these images of Blackness beneath Whiteness in racial hegemony. This thirst for "the other" and the artistic difference that Black popular culture represents in America is still trapped beneath the confines of a favored national identity, one that truly represents what it means to be American.

The histories of Black televisual representation offer important intersections between American history, politics, and racial identity. If investigations into television history are meant to help point the way forward for new research in a neglected area, they will need to encompass the multiple varieties of Black television and its aesthetics, images, and criticism—from its beginnings to this study's present (i.e. the decade of the 1970's). I believe it's important to understand how the television imagery of Black culture arrived at a point in the 1970's when things began to change. To do so, I must address the history of Blacks and Blackness in television prior to the 1970s.

In scholarly histories of Black people on screen, Black representation has most often been accused of promoting stereotypical and negative images that have worked to sustain the racial hegemony of White people in relation to Black people and Black culture. This focus on stereotypes in on-screen representation begins early in the formation of film studies as a widespread academic discipline in the 1970s with Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Film*.[10] Starting with minstrelsy and vaudeville, Bogle sets the stage for images specific to Blacks and Whites in Blackface. Particularly important to my project, the images and depictions of Black life expressed through minstrel

[10] Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Film*, Viking Press, 1973.

shows worked to categorize Blacks into comedic social categories that many argue are still present today. Vaudeville, a theatrical genre of variety entertainment, reached heights of great popularity in the late 19th and early 20th century. During this period and style of performance many Black actors were hired on circuits and their performances depicted early understandings of national humor that poked fun at the many socially degrading characters that Blacks people emulated. Vaudeville also set the stage for musicians, singers, dancers, comedians, and to Blacks and Whites in blackface which were popularized in the minstrels. The images and depictions of Black life expressed through minstrel shows worked to categorize Blacks into comedic social categories that many argue are still present today. These images of American humor in general, and Black American humor specifically began as a "wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community."[11]

Although the previous quote is in reference to Black-authored humor specifically, I believe that it also took Black actors to laugh at what was cruel or unjust in order to act in White minstrels. Of these multiple portrayals of Black humor there are (a possibly condensed list) seven types of hyper-racialized characters developed through early Black representation many that we see recycled in the Tandem shows of the 1970's. These seven types are 1) the content slave (tom, coon, mammy); 2) the wretched freeman (particularly northern Blacks during Jim Crow); 3) the tragic mulatto; 4) the brute Negro; 5) the comic Negro (Sambo); 6) the exotic

[11] Carpio, Glenda. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. Oxford University Press, 2008, p.4.

primitive; 7) and the local color, meant for comic relief and to juxtapose against a white protagonist.[12] The commonality among these seven identities is that the Black body has no redeeming characteristics; instead, Black characters are embodied representations of the lazy, dirty, criminal, which was seen as a foil to their White counterparts. These characters, although identified in early popular culture, are present in the shows that I have chosen to analyze. Particularly the images of the brute Negro, the Mammy, and the Sambo were all present in *Sanford and Son, Good Times,* and *The Jeffersons* specifically. Those in control of these images play a vital role in the reception and understanding of racialized subjects in these sitcoms. Although Bogle's work is integral to understanding the Black image on screen in historical perspective, Bogle's focus on these *negative* images in fact obscures the progressive work present in the Black sitcoms upon which I focus.

To remain dominant in public perception, those who control the images circulate representations and understandings that are consistent with them being in power. Centering on all venues of mass culture, the search of an *authentic* Black subject may have seemed attainable but was ever more difficult due to the complexities of racial identity and hegemony in America. Who is searching for this subject and what tools are they using for the search? Television, in my opinion, is the most important of these avenues of mass culture. Its early effects on the family and national viewing have been used to disseminate information widely and to identify authentic gendered, racial, and classed subjects.[13] If Bogle's 1973 *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes* was the first history of Black representation on film, then J. Fred MacDonald's was the first history

[12] Means Coleman, Robin R. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*. Routledge, 2000, pp.81-83.

[13] Spigel, Lynn. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

of Blacks on television. Published a decade after Bogle's film history, MacDonald's *Blacks and White TV: African American in Television Since 1948* (1983) is the first book-length consideration of Blacks on American television.[14] MacDonald contends that, as an integral part of American culture, television is both a reflector and creator of the popular consciousness insofar as it helps to disseminate relevant topical information and aids in the creation of popular culture. MacDonald chronicles the medium's commercial emergence and pervasive popularity from 1948 through the early 1980s as well as the disappointments, prejudices, and failures experienced by both the television industry and American society. Throughout his work, he seeks to prove that television had the potential and the promise to reverse centuries of unjust ridicule and antisocial images of Blacks, both of which circulated throughout the culture. Given that television was meant not only to be an entertainment medium but also to serve as a vehicle for social engagement, its potential role to encourage a more just society was crucial. In early popular shows like *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951-1953) and *Beulah* (1950-1952), Black people were portrayed in comical or subservient terms, as sociologist Darnell Hunt puts it, "either as buffoons unequipped for equal participation in society or as servants who seemed content to cater to the needs of their White masters."[15]

To study television's progression from these subservient images, MacDonald's work is heavily reliant on magazines, newspapers, interviews, and his own textual analyses. He uses historical events in U.S. national politics to discuss the trends in television and its treatment of Blacks. His primary focus is on the image of Blacks and the context of their appearance across

[14] MacDonald, J. Fred. *Blacks and White TV: African American in Television Since* 1948, Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1983.

[15] Hunt, Darnell M. *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 269.

all genres of television, fictional and non-fictional. For example, MacDonald discusses the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's-1970 in conjunction with the rise of Black people in both broadcast news coverage and Black television shows. However, he concludes television in the 1970's is "The Age of New Minstrelsy." MacDonald argues that the evolution toward television without racial prejudice came to an abrupt end in the early 1970s. For reasons that were political, economic, and social, the role of Blacks in TV was refashioned in the 1970's to reflect the popular attitudes and national directions of the decade, which abandoned the movement toward fairness made possible by programming achievements in the 1960's. Blacks people remained visible, but often in new stereotyped and subordinate roles. MacDonald suggests that "the quality of African-American performance was debased. Black sensibilities were ignored. Concern with minority social problems evaporated in entertainment and nonfiction shows."[16] Although Blacks were consistently used in comedies, serious characterization of Blacks in other dramatic genres was limited and predictable. Moreover, he believes that Black movement into production and management positions remained minimal and the use of recognized Black talent, as well as the nurturing of new performers, was slight.

Recent scholarship on race and representation has caused MacDonald's premises and conclusions in *Blacks and White TV* to now seem problematic. Since his book's release in 1983, new work on the U.S. history of race relations and on race in the mass media suggests that MacDonald's assumption that television ever sought to produce "prejudice-free…popular entertainment" is overstated at least.[17] Television's interests in corporate capital and its inheritances from film and radio are both heavily influenced by the history and legacy of minstrelsy.

[16] Ibid., 5.

[17] Ibid.

Nevertheless, MacDonald set the framework and opened avenues for new research to bring to light heretofore undiscussed programs (such as television's first Black soap opera *Birds of an Iron Feather* (1970)), which can add to this story and promise of Blacks on television.

While many shows of this early television era recycle varying situations, the Black sitcoms of Tandem Productions do in fact encounter situations that differ from the norm, situations that are inherently Black and stand as social satire with elements of seriality throughout. The sitcom can be read to help lay bare the mores, images, ideals, prejudices, and ideologies in its topical moment. There is much history that can and must be captured from the sitcom. As Darrell Hamamoto expresses, "the study of the television situation comedy is an exercise in examining the relationship of popular art to its historically specific setting."[18] Surveying histories of television sitcoms in general offers a unique history of what is understood as national American humor. American humor in general, and of Black humor specifically, began as a "wrested freedom," the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community.[19] Sociologist Herman Gray categorizes Black sitcoms like *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons* as being a part of a "separate but equal" or "pluralist" discourse.[20] In these sitcoms, predominantly Black casts demonstrate that Black families have the same basic problems as White families,

[18] Hamamoto, Darrell. *Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology*, Praeger; New Edition, 2001, p. 9.

[19] Carpio, Glenda. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of* Slavery, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 1-2.

[20] Gray, Herman. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness.* University of Minnesota Press, 2004. p. 89.

"where Black characters live and work in hermetically sealed social milieus that are approximately equivalent to their White counterparts."[21]. However, no matter their class status, the majority of sitcoms about White families (i.e. *All in the Family* and *Maude*) take place in favorable and safe living conditions, within single family homes, and where race and socioeconomics are not the center of the narrative.

Much of the writing on Black sitcoms has focused on *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992). However, this series is the exception in scholarship and popular press rather than the rule.[22] Tandem paved the way for *Cosby* in its address of the Black family sitcom, and I focus on Tandem's Black sitcoms as they show an interesting shift in viewing styles and influences during the 1970s. Through the situation comedy's early dependency on the three-camera structure and "one-room set" (Sanford's home and business, Evans' apartment, Jefferson's high-rise), Tandem was able to enter the domiciles of Black families and offer to its viewers an inside look into the confines of Black life.[23] Tandem's Black sitcoms responded to their political moment through critical engagement with Black community issues such as poverty, employment, health, education, etc. As they are situation comedies, these shows dealt with the Black situation in America, and the various ways in which Black families contend with these situations. Tandem Productions and its sitcom creations thus revolutionized both the subject matter and the business of network television. According to Christine Acham, "for cultural critics and

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[21] Gray, Herman. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness."* University of Minnesota Press, 1995. Also see Haggins, Bambi. Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America. Rutgers University Press, 2007. p. 8.

[22] Coleman, Robin Means. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy*, Garland Publishing, 1998, p. 21.

[23] Newcomb, Horace. *TV: The Most Popular Art*, Anchor Books, 1974, p. 28.

members of the African American population to ignore television's potential as a forum of resistance is to misread levels of vernacular meaning inherent in many African American television texts."[24] I make sure to focus not only on the terms "stereotypes" or "negative images" but also on a reconstitution of Black te3levision as an intellectual tradition and as a present-day politics, which simultaneously reflects the topical moment in which the show was produced. In this instance, it is constructed, in large part, by the Black actors and writers of Tandem Productions. As such, the production histories of these specific series very much matter.

In 1971, television producers Lear and Yorkin, working with CBS, developed the television show *All in the Family* (1971-1979). This sitcom chronicled the life and times of Archie Bunker and his wife (Edith) and daughter (Gloria). The show is set in the White suburbs of the Astoria section of Queens, New York and centers on Bunker, a White working-class bigot who constantly squabbles with his family over the important issues of his current political and social climate. Bunker is generally prejudiced against anyone who is not an American citizen, a political Conservative, or a heterosexual White Protestant male. Despite his bigotry, Lear and Yorkin attempted to make Bunker's character into someone with whom a broad range of viewers could identify. That is, he was an ordinary working-class man struggling to adapt to major changes occurring in his world. Much of what is seen in popular culture shares a perspective that associates Whiteness with employment, stability, order, rationality, rigidity, qualities brought out by the contrast of Black disorder, irrationality, and looseness. The personification of Archie as the "loveable bigot" and the depiction of the modern working-class White family are visualized as normal and commonplace. Whereas the personification of characters and families in the Black

[24] Acham, Christine. *Revolution Televised: Primetime and the Struggle for Black* Power, Minnesota Press, 2005, xv.

sitcoms of Tandem, even with similar means as the Bunkers, are read as disorganized, buffoonish, and unstable.

Regardless of Archie Bunker's explicitly prejudiced thoughts and language, *All in the Family* consistently reached to the top of the ratings charts in its eight-year run. Given its extraordinary success, Lear and Yorkin were eager to find new avenues through which to dramatize the daily trials of working-class American citizens. Since the cancellation of *The Amos N' Andy Show* (1951-1953) and *Beulah* (1950-1952) the daily trials of the Black community had largely not been seen on a television sitcom. Eager to explore new frontiers and break new ground, as they had done with *All in the Family*, Lear and Yorkin took a leap and decided that they would produce a situation comedy about a community that did not then exist on television, the Black urban ghetto. In 1972, when Tandem's *Sanford and Son* (based on the British sitcom *Steptoe and Son* (1962-1974)) appeared on American television, it became the first production company since the NAACP pressure brought about the shutdown of *The Amos N' Andy Show,* twenty years earlier, to create an all-Black casted situation comedy with a progressive social slant. With this Black sitcom, and two others to follow (*Good Times* and *The Jeffersons*), Tandem Productions sparked a major change in the network situation comedy. That is, they not only reintroduced the Black private sphere to primetime network television but also dealt with historically contentious matters in their sitcom's content such as intracommunity economics, Black gender norms, electoral politics, dissent, and protest, to name a few. The fact that the rise of these critically acclaimed all-Black casted sitcoms came from the creation of White executives cannot be ignored. Although referring to the television industry in the late 1990s, sociologist Darnell Hunt's "Black Content, White Control" makes a pertinent point when it quotes an NAACP report regarding industry diversity.

> "The current initiative has focused primarily on the greater inclusion of racial minorities in the

> broadcast network television industry. Although the accurate depiction of minorities in front of the camera continued to be a critical consideration, the impetus behind the current initiative was the belief that once integration took place behind the camera in executive and decision-making positions, the proper portrayal of the American public would naturally evolve."[25] [26]

The rise of Black people onscreen called for a reconstitution of Black people in production. Although Hunt is specifically referencing the 1990s, the early 1970s was the launch pad for such initiatives. This dissertation adds dimension to understanding the impact that these sitcoms had in popular culture and on television, and is more precise about the history of an independent production company known for comically depicting race and working-class Black American life. Using the personal papers of Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin, examining production documents and budgets, interviews, contracts, viewer letters, original scripts, important events in national and Black politics, and popular magazine coverage of the shows, I create a history that addresses Tandem Production's politics of representation to suggest why and how the company initiated and encouraged the rise of Black cultural representation in network sitcoms.

This dissertation offers a theoretically informed consideration of the cultural, political contexts, power dynamics, and social implications of Black television imagery. Beginning in 1972 with *Sanford and Son*, the first of television's massive influx (seven Black sitcoms throughout the 1970s) of Black sitcoms led to breaking down many social and cultural barriers in the entertainment industry; during this time, the politics of race in the United States consist-

[25] Hunt, Darnell M. *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 267.

[26] National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. *Out of Focus—Out of Sync: Take 3*. November 2003, p.7.

ently worked to complicate the image of Blacks as being at the bottom of the totem pole of racial and cultural hegemony.[27] Said best by sociologists Omi and Winant, "the presence of a system of…stereotypes," is not only a "permanent feature of U.S. culture," but one that is "essential" and "integral" to its social order.[28] As stated earlier, I do not focus on stereotypes or "negative images" in my dissertation. Neither do I conduct a survey history of Black sitcoms or address all Black sitcoms of the 1970s and after. Furthermore, I will not discuss every episode in the entire broadcast run of the three aforementioned Black sitcoms that are my focus. Rather, episodes and production documents that place a particular focus on race, class, and gender that will serve as microcosms of the topical state of Black cultural politics at that time. For example, I examine law and order and the state of the Black man and the criminal justice system as dramatized and critiqued in "Fred Sanford, Legal Eagle." As noted in my opening example, on-screen narratives favor Black men who are defenseless in a legal setting and must resort to trickery as a means of securing justice. As indicated, I will be looking at themes in these sitcoms that are linked to broader social and industrial changes throughout the 1970s. Certainly, a good part of Tandem's success can be attributed to their capitalizing on an underrepresented market, but the fact that their narratives challenged the social milieu in ways that were rare in network sitcoms was no small feat. How were they able to do this under intense network constraints? Who were their network allies and facilitators? And what exactly was their motivation in using television so critically? In addition to my focus on the text and textual readings, these are some of the larger questions to which my dissertation offers insights.

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[27] Through the production of 1970s Black sitcoms, Black people were increasingly employed in the entertainment industry as writers, producers, and actors. Through this influx of jobs, Black people gradually became the writers of their own stories and gained access to speak for themselves on screen.

[28] Omi, Michael and Winant, Howard. *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*, Routledge, 2nd Edition, 1994, p. 63.

As I have previously mentioned, the scope of this dissertation covers a particular period in U.S. history that is integral to understanding not only major changes to television, but also racial and cultural representation throughout all forms of visual media. Prominent in the late 1960s and early 1970s, amidst a social milieu of domestic bigotry and the effects of the Vietnam War, Black Power emphasized racial pride and the creation of Black political and cultural institutions meant to nurture and promote Black collective interests and advance Black values. A great part of this revolution of Blackness was—and still is—Black representation in the media and arts and how these medias effected change in the real lives of Blacks in America. In particular, as a tool for information gathering and mass communication, television played a large role in social, racial, and cultural formation. During this time in televisual representation, Black characters were repeatedly coupled with White counterparts in such popular network hits as the secret-agent series *I Spy* (1965-1968) and the middle-class Black single mother sitcom *Julia* (1968-1971, whose counterpart was the doctor she worked for Morton Chegley (Lloyd Nolan)). Although both these series presented a more "respectable" and middle-class image of Black people than previous series did, they nonetheless lacked critical discussion of Black issues of the time and the shows represent a very particular Black community sphere.[29] Tandem Productions' reintroduction of the all-Black sitcom in primetime, beginning with *Sanford and Son*, established the fact of Black interiority on network television.[30] Putting at the forefront

[29] Harper, Phillip Brian, "Extra-Special Effects: Televisual Representation and the Claims of 'the Black Experience" in *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States*, ed. Sasha Torres, Duke University Press, 1998, pp. 62-71.

[30] I am using the term "Black Interiority" to describe these shows that directly address the lives of Black families and communities in the work place, between one another, and most importantly to this genre of sitcom, within the home. This dialogue of Black interiority places these Black characters in direct response to their political, social, and economic moment (i.e. how particular political actions or policies directly affect the characters and their daily lives, addressed on the show).

matters of the Black community such as poverty, employment, health, education, and culture, it is important to address the fact that Tandem's Black sitcoms specifically responded to the political moment, and that network television (seeing profits and critical acclaim) followed suit by increasing the number of such shows, thereby laying the foundation for a new vision of Black television going forward. In this regard, another important aspect of this period is the broad industrial and cultural power of the television network. In an article titled "What is Television Now?" Amanda Lotz discusses the early age of television beginning in the 1950s. During the "network era," between 1952 and the mid-1980s, the original big three networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) controlled, produced, and distributed all American television.[31] This is particularly important because Tandem's all-Black sitcoms had to contend with a highly regulated but competitive network schedule, and competition from a variety of shows (mostly all-White) for a finite viewership. Lotz contends that the network era provided the basic structure of television's industrial organization and social role. The three networks had complete control over the nation's viewing content and the images they saw on screen. They "delivered content on a linear through-the-day schedule—shows were available only at appointed times."[32] Moreover to appeal to the broadest demographic they also relied heavily on "family viewing and the family audience."[33] An entire family sitting in front of a television with a limited variety of viewing options, thus has a restricted power of choice. The networks in turn, with a finite roster of shows, had to seek images that featured broad and universal themes. As Lotz puts it, they were

[31] Lotz, Amanda"What is U.S. Television Now?" in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 625, 2009, p. 50.

[32] Ibid., 51.

[33] Ibid., 50.

pushed toward "homogeneous content likely to be accepted by a heterogeneous audience."[34]

Along with this concept of family viewing, I often cite various trade journals and magazines such as *TV Guide* that underscore the moment within which these sitcoms lived. As television redefined social life and the domestic space, *TV Guide* added to this redefinition. Upon coming home from a long day's work, one could sit on her/his couch, open a *TV Guide*, and schedule her/his evening around the viewing of her/his show(s). "The viewer is inclined to accept it as his window to the world, as his reporter on what is happening."[35] Through Lee Wagner selling the three regional TV programming magazines to media mogul Walter Annenberg, a merging of the three led to *TV Guide's* first national issue, which was released on April 3rd, 1953 for fifteen cents.[36]

Weekly program listings within each *TV Guide* began on Saturday and ended on Friday. Spreading the word about their magazine, *TV Guide* employees spoke to studio producers informing them that, if they want high ratings, they must call in and list their show on *TV Guide*. *Sponsor Magazine*, a publication for radio and TV advertising buyers and commercial broadcasts stations, lists *TV Guide* as the "best-selling weekly magazine in America."[37] The ad in *Sponsor Magazine* goes further to say:

> "You as an advertiser want to ensure high ratings, with high sponsor identification…so do your stars, your stations, your producer, your director…program advertising in *TV Guide* is the an swer. Across the nation, one TV family in six reads it (6.5 million-circulation base, October

[34] Ibid., 51.

[35] Spigel, Lynn. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 99.

[36] The three original publications were; *TeleVision Guide* for New York, *TeleVision Guide* for New England, and *TeleVision Guide* for Baltimore-Washington.

[37] *Sponsor Magazine* August 9th, 1958, 9.

> 4)—and the average reader reads it five times a day. That audience alone is equivalent of a 16 rating. *TV Guide* magazine is the national watchword. Zoom in on *TV Guide* and your Ratings won't fade out! A weekly magazine…A daily habit."[38]

Given the figures laid out in the *Sponsor* advertisement, it is apparent that *TV Guide* held an important and sometimes vital role in television viewing and television culture, socially and economically. In sum, I use TV Guide as a means to understand the ways in which television was viewed in the 1970's and how the magazine advertised Black sitcoms for diverse audience bases. In addition to *TV Guide*, I will utilize *Ebony* (1945-Present) and *Jet* (1951-2014) magazines as they represent print media that is written by and for Black communities. These magazines were so critical to the Black community that the day comedian and actor Redd Foxx first made the cover of *Jet Magazine*, he interrupted the filming of his television show to read every sentence. He reportedly stated to his producers, "I have been trying to get on the cover of *Jet* for twenty years…I have made it and I am going to read every word. This doesn't mean anything to you, but this is *our* bible."[39] Arguably, to the Black community, if it wasn't in *Ebony* or *Jet*, it simply didn't happen. There are distinct differences in the ways in which the Black sitcoms are discussed in *Jet* and *Ebony* in contrast to the White-ran magazines and trade journals.

With the aid of the aforementioned trade journals and magazines, television has always had the power to present images to its viewers from which they often developed theories and ethics regarding society and communities that they might not otherwise have encountered in their daily lives. Indeed, television regularly propagated a range of theories and concepts regarding society, history, and culture to viewers in entertaining ways, and during this era, in which the big three networks were the only choices for viewing, racial groups were regularly

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Trescott, Jacqueline. "*Jet:* The Mirror of Black America Celebrates its 30th Year," *The Washington Post*, 11/18/1981.

defamed in various ways. Mostly White casted family sitcoms of the 1950s onward—whether the idealized family sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) or the farcical family of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957)—displayed the culture's dominant notion of family as White and middle class. These shows were largely focused on the everyday experiences of Whites raising a family and living in the suburbs and cities of America. Their content rarely discussed economic issues such as securing employment or social issues such as racial injustice and, in the few instances in which they did, their approach to such issues was strikingly different from the shows that featured Black families like *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. My dissertation, using Tandem Productions as its focus, thus aims to flesh out the lack of discussion about Black television during the period of a strong network industry whose "universal" content discounted people of color.

In my dissertation, I bring together a production history of Tandem with analyses of particular episodes of its Black sitcoms highlighting themes that are relevant to the state of Black Americans in the 1970's. Here, I will also research the writers of particular episodes of these shows that respond to national, social, and political issues. The main episodic themes that I will be following through these three Black sitcoms are: 1. "hustle economics" (the specifically racialized ways which Black community members engage with informal or sometimes illegal economies), 2. Black gender norms and expectations (the historical and cultural traditions that construct the formation of gender roles in Black families), 3. Black artist's dissent with White executives, and topical political issues (electoral politics, and Black activism). I believe these themes are important not only because they are hardly addressed in scholarship on these Black sitcoms, but because they make clear the agency and resilience of the Black artists at Tandem, and also because these themes offer critical foils to sitcoms whose focus is on White middle-class families and communities. In watching these Black sitcoms, it is evident that the

situations surrounding Black life deal largely with precarious economic situations and social issues of the day. However, the development of Tandem's Black sitcoms over time show changes in these economic conditions, broader addresses of social issues, and a growing presence of Black women. These changes are due in large part to the dissent of the Black artists at Tandem, and these transformative ways of seeing Blackness on screen were possible through the agency and resilience of these Black artists.

I put into conversation how each of the three sitcoms addresses these themes with an episode from each as an example, with a particular focus on episodes written by Black creators; where applicable, the analyses is both thematic and production focused.[40] This focus is important in discussing how the rise of Black writers in the industry promoted images of Black resilience and agency that were sometimes accepted but more often were met with contention from White television executives. In order to discuss "hustle economics" (the racialized "under the table," "catch as catch can," and sometimes illegal methods working class Blacks must use to survive financially), I will examine *Sanford and Son* "The Card Sharps" (Oct. 27th, 1972), *Good Times* "Getting Up the Rent" (Feb. 22nd, 1974), and *The Jeffersons* "George's Skeleton" (Feb. 22nd, 1975).[41] In order to address how Tandem deals with Black gender norms and expectations (the space of Black women's representation on screen and behind the scenes at Tandem), I examine *Sanford and Son* "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (Jan. 4th, 1974), *Good Times*

[40] Although much analysis will be taken from these specific episodes, production (script, costume, set design) and thematic analyses will be taken from various episodes throughout the sitcoms. With a specific engagement of the episodes written by Black writers, when applicable.

[41] *Sanford and Son* "The Card Sharps": Fred must come to Lamont's aid as he is being conned by a group of hustlers. *Good Times* "Getting Up the Rent": With an eviction notice over their heads, the Evans family scrambles to come up with the money needed for their rent. *The Jeffersons* "George's Skeleton": When an old friend threatens to expose an embarrassing secret from George's past unless he's paid in full, Louise and Lionel turn the tables on his buddy's blackmail business.

"Sex and The Evan's Family" (March 15th, 1974), and *The Jeffersons* "Louise Feels Useless" (Feb. 1st, 1975).[42] In order to discuss the Black artist's dissent with White executives in these sitcoms, I bring into the conversation various walkouts by actors, lawsuits, and contract renegotiations that prove critical to these show's success. Finally, to contextualize how Tandem calls attention to 1970s contemporary inequality and protest (whether by informal means or through organizations that focus on specific political or social issues), I discuss episodes such as; *Sanford and Son* "Lamont Goes African" (Jan. 19th, 1973), *Good Times* "The Visitor" (April 5th, 1974), and *The Jeffersons* "Like Father, Like Son" (April 5th, 1975).[43] In particular, my episodic analyses of Tandem's Black situation comedies that portray "hustle economics," relies heavily on evidence of Black gender norms and expectations, dissent, and protest evident in, production documents, popular trade press, and political and social issues. In this way, my dissertation builds on these primary documents to address how the dominance of Tandem Production's Black situation comedies in the 1970s helped bring progressive changes to the television industry. My analysis of these shows bears upon questions of media historiography and uses media and political economic analysis, relying on important scholarship in these areas for its conclusions.

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[42] *Sanford and Son* "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe": Fred's feathers get ruffled when an old friend from St. Louis comes to town claiming to be Lamont's actual father. *Good Times* "Sex and The Evan's Family": Florida finds what she believes to be a dirty story called, "Sexual Behavior in the Ghetto." Assuming it to be J.J.'s, Florida confronts him, but she is in for a surprise when Thelma claims it. *The Jeffersons* "Louise Feels Useless": When Louise has trouble adjusting to the good life in their new high-rise, she secretly takes a job at George's rival dry cleaners.

[43] *Sanford and Son* "Lamont Goes African": Lamont looks to reinvent himself by adopting an African name and lifestyle. *Good Times* "The Visitor": Michael submits an angry letter about the conditions in the Evans' apartment to a newspaper and gets an immediate response from a housing commission official who quickly finds himself stranded in the ghetto and experiences the conditions first hand. *The Jeffersons* "Like Father, Like Son": George and Louise get involved in a local election, the "race card" is played to comic effect, proving that phony politicians come in all colors.

My overarching thesis is that the representations of Black culture in the sitcoms of Tandem Productions in the 1970s are not only emblematic of the business and infrastructural shifts within the television industry during this decade (such as the hiring of more liberal and Black producers, writers and actors), but also that the themes of these sitcoms responded to topical national political and social issues including "hustle economics," Black gender norms and expectations, dissent, and further emphasized Black agency and resilience within an established but increasingly contested racial and social order. In sum, I argue that these Tandem Productions Black sitcoms and the Black artists (actors, writers, etc.) initiated the rise of Black cultural representation and social critique in a number of network sitcoms that followed. Between the introduction and conclusion of my dissertation, the chapter breakdown is organized chronologically between the years 1972-1975 to reflect the historical and industrial context in which Tandem produced its all-Black cast sitcoms; *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*.

The following chapters will be centered on more specific analyses of Tandem's Black sitcoms and the themes they address. My aim is to understand the production model at Tandem Productions as a whole and how the Black artists involved with each show added to and complicated the company's production culture. All chapters will deal with relevant production issues as well as their cultural and political contexts. I research these series in chronological order because, all of they are all of them inextricably linked and detail a developmental arc of racial formation on network television with regards to Blackness. Over time, Tandem both enacts integration, and in a way also re-segregates. Before *All in the Family*, sitcoms were predominantly segregated and featured all-White casts. *All in the Family* slowly integrated race marginally through its inclusion of the Jefferson family as the Bunker's neighbors. *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times* represented a somewhat separate but [un]equal portrayal of a family as they featured an all-Black cast, but their financial and social circumstances were unequal to their

White counterparts. Finally, *The Jeffersons* represented an integrated-privileged model in which although Black characters were in leading roles, *The Jeffersons* featured a racially integrated cast, all possessing financial privilege. This arc of racial formation is evident in the chronological production of these shows and their spin offs. Chapter 1 will excavate the landscape of television history leading to the development of Tandem Productions. Chapter 2 will consider the primetime influence and cultural impact of Tandem's *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977), which was the first of Tandem's sitcoms that dared to represent the Black domestic sphere and the struggles of the Black actors and writers and their efforts to reframe the ways in which Black communities were represented on television. Chapter 3 will discuss television's first Black "nuclear family" in *Good Times* (1974-1979), focusing in particular on the show's often comically dysfunctional ways of representing the resilience of Black working-class life on screen. In Chapter 4, I will address the cultural impact of *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985) and the cast's portrayal of a comedic narrative of the American Dream and Black financial ascension, amidst the realism of living within the confines of racial hegemony and conflicting identity politics. Each chapter will address the ways in which Tandem's Black artists contended with White executive power and how hustle economics, gender, and dissent took different forms in each of the Black sitcoms. Through these analyses, I chronicle the agency and resilience of Tandem's Black artists in their various efforts in complying with or resisting the authoritative power.

Chapter One: Approaching Tandem Productions

"I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights…When we see that there must be a radical redistribution of economic and political power, then we see that for the last twelve years we have been in a reform movement…That after Selma and the Voting Rights Bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution…In short, we have moved into an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society."- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967 on "Why a Poor People's Campaign?"[44]

Entering the 1960s, Black people in America were seeking a change in the political, cultural, and economic systems that have historically been against them. Black people consistently questioned and fought to reform their national image to feel the sense of liberty that their White counterparts have always had. Efforts such as The Poor People's campaign quoted above, directly correlate with the Black sitcoms of Tandem Productions to come, as they all discuss the situations of Black people and class. Also, correlating to the themes of Tandem's Black sitcoms, this period's increasing need and fight for equality in jobs, housing, voting rights, education, etc. created what came to be known collectively as the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement refers to social movements in the United States guided by the goal of enforcing constitutional and legal rights to African Americans. This movement brought about the prominence of many Black American leaders such as: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks to name a few. In the 1960 presidential election between Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy and the Republican candidate Richard Nixon, Black people in America saw an ally in their struggle for civil rights in the young and ambitious figure of Kennedy. At the time of this election Black people in the Jim Crow South were barred from public facilities, subject to racist insults and violence, and denied the right to vote under various circumstances,

[44] "The Poor People's Campaign of 1968" https://poorpeoplescampaign.org/poor-peoples-campaign-1968/

which signaled a call for change in social and public policy across the United States. Viewed as a proponent of change and progress, Kennedy won the voting support of over 70 percent of Black people across the nation.[45] The leadership of President Kennedy and others of that time worked to help Black people feel closer to something that they had never known: equality, liberty, and true American citizenship. Kennedy's first step in responding to civil rights pressures was appointing "unprecedented numbers of African Americans to high level positions in the administration", in turn strengthening the Civil Rights Commission. Kennedy, along with his Vice President Lyndon Johnson (who ran the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity), spoke out in favor of school desegregation, while praising a number of cities for integrating their schools.[46]

With attacks on Black people continuing across the Jim Crow South, activists argued that more action needed to be taken. In the spring of 1963 Birmingham, Alabama became a site of mass protests, violence, and arrests. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Black leaders led the protests on the basis of civil disobedience and increased racial tension. To cease the protest, Alabama government officials called upon the Birmingham police force. Armed with batons, attack dogs, and water hoses the Birmingham police forcibly restrained the protestors. After this mass catastrophe, which was broadcasted throughout the nation in various media sources, in response, President Kennedy sped up the drafting of a comprehensive civil rights bill. The Civil Rights Bill reads as such:

> The divisions of this legislation included: (1) protecting African Americans against discrimination in voter qualification tests; (2) outlawing discrimination in hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and all other public accommodations engaged in interstate commerce; (3) authorizing the U.S. Attorney

[45] Civil Rights Bill of 1964.

[46] Ibid.

General's Office to file legal suits to enforce desegregation in public schools; (4) authorizing the withdrawal of federal funds from programs practicing discrimination; and (5) outlawing discrimination in employment in any business exceeding 25 people and creating an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to review complaints.[47]

Clearing several hurdles in its development, the Civil Rights Bill won the endorsement of the House and Senate Republican leaders. However, before it was passed President Kennedy was assassinated. This brutal murder took a large toll on Black Americans, depressing the hopes of many for a better American society.

Upon the assassination of President Kennedy, Vice President Lyndon Johnson grabbed the reins of the United States Presidency in 1963. Having served as a Senator from the South (Texas), Johnson was able to sway Southern politicians and pass the Civil Rights Bill into a law. In addition to the passing of this new act, Johnson constructed a political plan to tackle inequality and opportunity in America, the Great Society. Figures from the 1960 census, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Commerce Department, and the Federal Reserve estimated anywhere from 40 to 60 million Americans—or 22 to 33 percent—lived below the poverty line. At the same time, the nature of poverty itself was changing as America's population increasingly lived in cities, not farms (and could not grow its own food).[48]A major part of this plan to combat this came to be known as the “War on Poverty”, which was part of President Johnson’s attempt to expand federal government’s role in domestic policy. This called for those in poverty to receive federal aid with regards to living expenses, obtaining jobs, medical care, and education. The Great Society offered a means to continuing President Kennedy’s plans. Arguably, the two most important major initiatives (to urban working-class Black people) in the Great Society

[47] Ibid.

[48] Mantler, Gordon. *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974*, 2015, p. 19.

were the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Social Security Act of 1965.

These plans helped to establish the Office of Economic Opportunity, another valuable asset to working class Black people as this office administered most of the War on Poverty's programs created during Johnson's administration. Most of the jobs that Black people were able to obtain were unskilled labor and factory positions. With their pay still drastically low compared to their White counterparts, many Black people were forced to go on welfare and receive government aid for food and housing. In years following the introduction of the War on Poverty in 1964, poverty levels in the United States dropped to their lowest levels since comprehensive records began in 1958.[49] Data indicates that poverty was roughly nineteen percent in the year the Economic Opportunity act was implemented, and decreased to 11.1 percent in 1973.[50] Yet, poor Black people, particularly women, suffered from the racism and sexism that amplified the impact of poverty. The Poor People's Campaign (referenced in the above quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) sought to address poverty through income and housing. The campaign demanded economic and human rights for poor Americans of diverse backgrounds. After presenting an organized set of demands to Congress and executive agencies, participants set up a protest camp on the Washington Mall, where they stayed for six weeks in the Spring of 1968. The Poor People's Campaign was motivated by a desire for economic justice: the idea that all people should have what they need to live. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference shifted their focus to these issues after observing that gains in civil rights had not improved the material conditions of life for many Blacks. The campaign would help the poor by dramatizing their needs, uniting all races under the commonality of hardship and presenting

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

a plan to start to a solution albeit the future difficult right-winged opponents in their path and the assassination of Martin Luther King later that year. As the singing group the Temptations' song "Ball of Confusion" indicated, these political tensions made their way into popular cultural discourse.

> *Fear in the air, tension everywhere*
> *Unemployment rising fast,*
> *The Beatles' new record's a gas*
> *And the only safe place to live is*
> *On an Indian reservation*
> *And the band played on*
> *Eve of destruction, tax deduction*
> *City inspectors, bill collectors*
> *Mod clothes in demand,*
> *Population out of hand*
> *Suicide, too many bills, hippies movin'*
> *To the hills*
> *People all over the world, are shoutin'*
> *End the war*
> *And the band played on.*[51]

As Black communities marched into the 1970's their fate in America took a drastic change. Ironically, The Temptations opened the 1970's with "their hit song 'Ball of Confusion,' an apt description of their current state of the world—particularly the ghetto."[52] A critique of the War on Poverty would believe that its attention to Black America created the grounds for the backlash that began in the 1970's. The perception by the White middle class that they were footing the bill for services to the poor, led to diminished support for welfare state programs. Many White people viewed Great Society programs as supporting the economic and social needs of low-income urban minorities; they lost sympathy, especially as the economy declined in the 1970's.

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[51] "Ball of Confusion" by The Temptations, Gordy, 1970.

[52] Kelley, Robin D.G. *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Beacon Press, 1997, p. 5.

Some economists and right-winged politicians have criticized President Johnson's methods in fighting the War on Poverty; much of their discomfort came from the amount of money that was spent to fund welfare programs. Critics believed that Johnson's policies actually had a negative impact on the economy because of their interventionist nature. Those who believe this recommended that the best way to fight poverty was not through government spending but through economic growth. Along with the progressive figures of racial uplift, like Dr. King and Malcolm X, there were popular conservative figures halting the progress that these individuals sought to make. One of the most popular and vocal conservative critics of this welfare system was former U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. As the Assistant Secretary of Labor during the Kennedy administration and during much of Johnson's, Moynihan was able to gather research on the future of America with the continuance of the War on Poverty programs. An educated White politician and sociologist, Moynihan published "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" in 1965, now commonly referred to as "The Moynihan Report."[53]

The Moynihan Report

Another major prefiguring force spurring Tandem's 1970's Black sitcoms, was the Moynihan Report which was originally released in 1965. Since the sitcom genre is largely abut family, it is important to breakdown the relevance of Moynihan for my argument as these shows depict varying models of Black family life while the Moynihan report addressed limited notions of the Black family. The report argued that even though America had implemented new

[53] Moynihan, Daniel P., "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," Washington, D.C., Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965.

policies with regards to government assistance, the gap between Black people and other groups in American society was widening due to Black people's dependence on these systems of welfare. Moynihan attributed this fact to the "Negro" family structure. His evidence as to why the gap was widening was that the Negro family in these urban ghettos was crumbling.[54] Through qualitative and quantitative research methods (interviewing members of a Black community through questions and metrics), Moynihan's research aimed to provide evidence that America needed a new national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure. He argued that, "the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so far out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well."[55] Without this collective goal of shifting the Negro family dynamic, according to Moynihan, the cycle of Black poverty and disadvantage in the United States would continue. His research demonstrated that even as fewer people were unemployed, more people were joining welfare rolls, to Moynihan, this meant that Black people were not self-sufficient. Moynihan categorized these recipients (and the majority of the Black community) as families with children but only one parent, the mother in most cases. The laws at this juncture permitted welfare assistance to families with this particular make up. Moynihan cited a 1960 study of Aid to Independent Children (AIC) recipients saying that, "the 'typical' AIC mother in Cook County was married and had children by her husband, who deserted and left his whereabouts

[54] Ibid., Preface.

[55] Ibid., 75.

unknown…the woman is now left alone with illegitimate children to support."[56] In this statement Moynihan attempted to define a "common" Black family structure in which the father is either unknown, absent, or otherwise not providing economic support. With "one-fourth of Negro births being illegitimate," Moynihan believed that Black family's dire need for welfare support was nothing more than a handout and that it was the responsibility of the nation to aid in the reconstructing of the Black family to a model similar to affluent Whites.[57] In searching for a root to the welfare problem and why Black people need it, Moynihan looked back into American slavery. Referencing writer Stanley Elkins, Moynihan contended that slavery had made Black people dependent on the dominant society, and that this dependence still existed in America.[58] Essentially, Moynihan was stating that it is in the nature of Blacks to seek support from the white elites in their times of need, and that this dependence would continue the cycle of oppression and discrimination that Blacks were facing. Furthermore, Moynihan undermined the struggle and direct action that made up the Civil Rights Movement by calling it the "Negro American Revolution."[59] He believed that the fundamental problem with this "Negro American Revolution" was that it was a movement for equality and liberty. This troubled him because though these were twin ideals of American democracy, equality was not as attractive as liberty. Moynihan did not believe that Black people would ever be equal with Whites. However, Moynihan believed that Black people in the Civil Rights Movement were overzealous in thinking that liberty meant opportunity and if the opportunities were open, then the results will be

[56] Ibid., 14.

[57] Ibid., 7.

[58] Ibid., 15.

[59] Ibid., 1.

equality. According to Moynihan, the Black community should not see themselves as fundamentally deserving of being equal to White people because they had never been.

For my study, it is important to address what I feel are a few of the damaging claims made in Moynihan's "Report." One critique of Moynihan relevant to Black sitcoms stems from his methods of trying to define a "typical" Black experience. Looking at the graphs and data that he has collected in order to visually prove differences between Whites and Blacks in America, he titled the categories "White" and "Nonwhite" (his terms) With the main focus of his research being on Blacks, the use of the term "Nonwhite" leaves room for numerous inaccuracies in his data. He collected his data from different categories of people of color and compared this data to "Whites," hence inflating the negative data on Blacks. Essentially, Moynihan's work was really a study of "Nonwhite" minorities labeled as Black. This made his data set unreliable regarding the construction and lived experiences of Black families in America.

Another critique of his work is that he speaks about the construction of the Black family, yet he does not offer an inside account about the life of Black families. As an outsider looking into the plight of Black families, he formulated a biased opinion to evaluate the inner-workings of these families. Moynihan did not offer any data on specific family incomes, number of children in the household, nor job availability, making his data speculative. Moynihan stated, "it is the conclusion of this survey…that what is true of central Harlem, can be said to be true of the Negro American world in general."[60] The problem with this statement is that he classified the Black working class culture as static and measurable rather than a fluid and living thing comprised of vastly different depending on families, communities, and cities. Once Black culture is seen as static or fixed, it becomes increasingly easy to cast Black people as "products of

[60] Ibid., Preface.

broken families, broken economies, and broken communities."[61] The Moynihan Report sparked critiques from Black people in the time of its release and more recently by scholars such as, Hortense Spillers and Roderick Ferguson, however, its national impact played a large part in the negative portraits of Black communities and socioeconomics throughout mass media.[62] Moynihan's particular notion of Black familial life remains a popular work of discussion to comprehend the social and economic disintegration of the late 20th century Black urban life.

Constructing a Black Image

The uneven successes of the Civil Rights Movement and the contradictions of the Moynihan Report are woven into the problem of constructing an appropriate Black image in Black 1970's sitcoms. It is of critical importance to place this political history and these policies in discussion with how Blacks were being written about, characterized, and ultimately projected on screen through television. To achieve this, it is necessary to address histories of Black visual representation and how these productions have influenced and shaped the history of the Black image to the point Tandem deploys it in the shows under consideration. Moynihan's fiction leaves no place for Black self-identification/classification with regards to ethnicity and gender. The "Report" worked to place White and Black families web of binary meanings, ones that render Black bodies defenseless to challenge their representations in popular opinion, discourse, and in the case of this study, television. There is a very distinct way in which Black and Black gender-specific performance is portrayed in comparison with its White counterparts on

[61] Kelley, Robin D.G. *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Beacon Press, 1997. pp.9-10.

[62] Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64–81 and Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

the small screen.

Racial groups were often defamed in the 1950's-1980s where the big three networks were the only choices of viewing. In this classic age of television, all popular situational comedy White families "featured the husband as breadwinner and the wife as the guardian of the hearth."[63] All-White casted family sitcoms of the 1950s onward—whether the perfect nuclear ones of *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) or the farcical family of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) and *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956)—told women that their domesticity was the highest form of female virtue. These shows were largely about the everyday experiences of White people raising a family and living in the large suburbs and cities of America. These popular shows rarely discussed social and economic issues, such as unemployment or battles with injustice. Yet, Erik Barnouw's study of the evolution of American television makes it clear that through civil rights figures like Malcom X and Martin Luther King, Jr., the shifting climate of the early 1960s put pressure on producers of television drama and commercials to change their largely "lily-white" world."[64]Although the daytime serial remained almost untouched progress was more noticeable in other areas. Inclusion of one or two Black people in crowd scenes became more standard and some series, such as *The Defenders* (1961-1965), *Eastside/Westside* (1963-1964), and *Bonanza* (1959-1973), featured Black actors as lawyers, doctors, nurses, etc.[65] Unfortunately, with this inclusion came various forms of resistance,

[63] Ibid., 81.

[64] Barnouw, Erik. *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television,* Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 326.

[65] Ibid.

ranging from sponsors like General Motors withdrawing commercials, and many southern affiliate stations refusing to carry certain episodes.[66] The efforts of Black inclusion in the media seemed to consistently be met with pushback, mirroring the of civil rights struggles still being fought across America.

In the late 1960s, amidst numerous racial uprisings (mainly of the Black working class) in metropolitan cities nationwide, the local, state, and national government were seeking answers to this unrest. At the national level, the government's response took the form of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. Known popularly as the Kerner Commission, this 11-member Presidential Commission was established by President Lyndon B. Johnson and chaired by Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois. In an address to the nation, President Johnson calls for an attack on the social conditions that bred years of racial civil unrest:

> "…The only, genuine, long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack—mounted at every level—upon the conditions that breed despair and violence. All of us know what those conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs. We should attack these conditions—not because we are fired by conscience. We should attack them be cause there is simply no other way to achieve a decent and orderly society in America…"[67]

The Kerner Commission was created to investigate the causes of the 1967 racial uprisings in the United States and to provide recommendations for the future to end such violent (at times) social protests. Although the Commission focused its efforts on the causes and response to Black civil unrest, there were only two Black members of this Commission: Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts and Roy Wilkins the Executive Director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The Commission declared that "our nation is moving

[66] Ibid., 327.

[67] Lyndon Baines Johnson, *Address to the Nation*. June 27th, 1967.

toward two societies, one Black, one White—separate and unequal."[68] The Commission delivered an indictment of White racism for isolating and neglecting Black people, and urged legislation to promote racial integration and enrich Black communities through the creation of jobs, job training programs, and decent housing. The Kerner Commission report's findings were that the uprisings resulted from Black frustration at the lack of economic opportunity. The report berated federal and state governments for failed housing, education, and social service policies. The findings of the commission were not well received, and President Johnson refused Kerner Commission's report.

In April 1968 rioting broke out in more than one hundred cities following the assassination of Civil Rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which was one month after the release of the report. King had stated that the report was a "physician's warning of approaching death, with a prescription for life," and that he knew that report findings had the potential to prevent racial civil unrest in America at large.[69] Notably, Chapter 15 of the report aimed some of its sharpest criticism at the images in mainstream media stating, "The press has too long basked in a White world looking out of it, if at all, with White men's eyes and a White perspective."[70] This section of the Kerner Commission report assessing media coverage recommended that the news media publish newspapers and produce programs that recognized the existence and activities of the Black community. "It would be a contribution of inestimable importance to race relations in the U.S. simply to treat ordinary news about Negroes as news of other groups is now

[68] History Matters. "Our Nation Is Moving Toward Two Societies, One Black, One White—Separate and Unequal:" Excerpts from the Kerner Report. http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6545/.

[69] Ibid.

[70] National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. 1967, p. 210.

treated."[71] This call to action made it clear that news and media of this moment was inherently biased towards the White community, created a static image of Black people, and that popular media images were distributed inequitably amongst the races. The Kerner Commission report also believed that, "television should develop programming which integrates Negroes in all aspects of televised presentations…television is such a visible medium that constructive steps are easy and obvious…Negro reporters should appear more frequently —and at primetime."[72]

Despite President Johnson's rejection of the Kerner Commission report, it was published and sold in book form. The report became a national bestseller, and in response to its findings, the year of 1968 started an influx of Black representations on the television screen and in television production. Network primetime television produced situational comedies, dramas, and variety shows featuring Black lead actors such as, *Julia* (1968-1971), *The Mod Squad* (1968-1973), *Room 222* (1969-1974), *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970-1974), and *Soul Train* (1971-2006) to name a few. In 1968, two of these shows even made the top-30 viewed shows in Nielsen ratings, with *Julia* at #7 and *The Mod Squad* at #28. As television sitcom imagery and content slowly began to become a place for more liberal discussion, 1960's television became increasingly more important to the national understanding of Black culture specifically.

The Kerner Commission report also addressed the need for public broadcast stations to create programs "whose subjects are rooted in the ghetto and its problems."[73] Various public affairs broadcasting programs were created by and for Black people; these included *Soul!* (1968-1973), *Black Journal* (1968-1977), *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant* (1968-1970, Brooklyn,

[71] Ibid., 212.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

NY), and *Say Brother* (1968-1982, Boston).[74] As Black people gained more control of the medium, they were able to produce local and national shows through public affairs broadcasting. For example, *Black Journal* was one of the few nonfiction programs that focused on Black subject matter and "boasted a 75 percent Black technical crew and a 95 percent Black production crew, an unprecedented occurrence on a nationally televised program."[75] According to Christine Acham, "*Black Journal* was a site of Black cultural resistance because it was positioned within this mainstream forum yet still produced critical Black news coverage, which was seen by a cross section of America."[76] *Black Journal* spawned many other local and national public affairs shows that worked to discuss issues, culture, and experiences of Black communities.[77] The import of these programs was linked to a growing sense of Black cultural identity in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968. Devorah Heitner suggests that many of these community public affairs programs were broadcast to contain and domesticate Black people and alleviate them from uprising in the wake of said assassination.[78] Her assertions are corroborated when former television staffers for *Say Brother* claimed that, " in exchange for giving African Americans their own television presence and a few jobs in the broadcasting industry, station executives and government officials hoped that African Americans would expose their discontent on the airwaves instead of engaging in street protests and uprisings."[79]

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[74] Ibid.

[75] Acham, Christine, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p.41.

[76] Ibid., 42.

[77] Heitner, Devorah. *Black Power TV.* Duke University Press, 2013.

[78] Ibid., 3.

[79] Ibid., 54.

Unfortunately, the progress of Black people who controlled their own images and created their own content was undermined by conservative political forces meant to stifle Black bodies. Because public access shows weren't competing for ratings and revenue, television executives didn't challenge these shows on their progressive tactics.

Although these shows were revolutionary in their representation of Blackness and by employing Black people behind the scenes, many of these shows were still critiqued by scholars and popular press for being one-dimensional in their portrait of the American Black experience. With the risks being more calculated due to profitability, it was largely up to network television shows to promote national change—but what did this mean in terms of Black bodies on screen and in production? The network shows of the 1960's however faced a multitude of conflicting issues in their use of Black imagery, and the answer still wasn't realized. Phillip Brian Harper's "Extra-Special Effects: Televisual Representation and the Claims of 'the Black Experience'" offers relevant points of intersection for this history.[80] Written in the late 1990's, Harper takes up the complex politics of African American televisual representation during the 1960's. He offers an important distinction between the two conflicting demands (representation and an authentic "Black experience") often placed on such representation by audience and critics. Harper doesn't examine a specific show; instead he explores commentary and criticisms through magazines and interviews on television to elucidate his claims. Discussing representation and the Black television experience, Harper puts into conversation simulacral versus mimetic realism. This distinction fuels Harper's reading of the anxieties produced by intraracial

[80] Harper, Phillip Brian. "Extra-Special Effects: Televisual Representation and the Claims of 'the Black Experience'" in *Living Color: Race and Television in the United* States, Duke University Press, 1998, p. 62.

division that inform critical assessments of Black televisual performance in the 1960's. Simulacral realism is representation that "would improve the objective conditions characterizing daily life for the mass of African Americans living within the scope of television's influence."[81] This term describes popular demands for greater representation of Blacks on TV, regardless of their roles, to improve their social status. On the other hand, he identifies the contradictory demand for relevance or "mimetic realism…whereby television would 'reflect' the social reality on which it was implicitly modeled."[82] While problematizing each of these demands, Harper calls for the merging of the two. Televisual representations of Black people have long served as a focus of debate because they are seen as having effects that extend beyond the domain of signs and into the realm of Black people's material well-being—compromising the social relations through which Black people's status in this country is conditioned. If Black people were seen on television more frequently and in roles comparable to their White counterparts, Black people in the United States might achieve a better social status. However, Harper contends that the growing debate about Black representation versus realism has placed Black people at odds in terms of identifying themselves and those around them. It is "precisely the intraracial distinctions of class that become particularly problematic in considerations of televisual representations of Black people, as both the medium and debate about it develop through the 1960's and early 1970's."[83]

In the 1960's, in shows like *Julia* and *Room 222* (1969-1974), critics saw these the in-

[81] Ibid., 62.

[82] Ibid., 70.

[83] Ibid., 69.

authenticity of televisual representations of Black life as inauthentic by their focus of exclusively "middle class" Black people.[84] Shows such as these work to negotiate intraracial social difference that is potentially disruptive to the political solidarity of the African American community. This need for the representation of a common Black experience on screen (mimetic realism) runs up against a simultaneous demand to recognize and constitute a diverse African American society. Harper ends his essay by accounting that what is necessary for the future of Black television imagery to reimagine this idea of a unitary Black experience, and to embrace the diversity within the Black community. Doing so, Black characters on screen will be less conflicted and fully embody an idea of Blackness that is universally accepted and will be met with less societal backlash. This new wave of redefined Black identities on screen, particularly in the 1970's, was largely in the hands of two White men, Bud Yorkin and Norman Lear and their company, Tandem Productions. Although there is no archival evidence that Yorkin and Lear were responding to the Kerner report, they possessed a keen awareness to the temporal marketability of screening Black people and situations on television—a key factor to their company's future success.

Tandem Productions

Norman Lear and his long-term colleague Bud Yorkin came together to form Tandem Productions in 1959. In order to achieve greater creative control, having met and worked together in early variety shows, such as the *Colgate Comedy Hour* (1950-1955), Bud Yorkin stated that this partnership with Lear was developed as a package to write, produce, direct, and

[84] Ibid.,71.

most importantly own their own content.[85] It was called "Tandem" because at its inception, its creators Lear and Yorkin, thought of themselves as "two guys on a tandem bicycle, pedaling uphill."[86] Coming from middle-class backgrounds, both men had the means, extensive credits, and diverse interests when Tandem Productions emerged, and the company was designed to allow them to pursue those interests individually or together, as they desired and was suitable for any given project.[87] Tandem was part of an innovative and expanding family of companies within the entertainment industry, that focused on the development production, and dissemination of television projects and theatrical motion pictures and the development and operation of cable and subscription television outlets, with diversification into support, allied, and adjunct entertainment fields. After completing a string of films, notably *Come Blow Your Horn* (1963), *Divorce American Style* (1967), and *Cold Turkey* (1971), to name a few, Tandem soon found their true calling in the medium of television.[88] After the directorial success of Tandem's film, *Cold Turkey*, United Artists offered Lear a three-feature deal, an opportunity anyone would take. However, Lear refused the United Artists film deal when CBS offered a 13-episode television deal for what would come to be Tandem's best-known show, *All in the Family* (1971-1979).[89]

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[85] "Bud Yorkin" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*, 1997. https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/bud-yorkin#about

[86] Lemack (Brad) Collection (PA Mss 58), *University of California, Santa Barbara Special Research Collections*, p. 2,. Memo on company's history and business structure.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Largely, all of these film's plotlines deal with financially well-off White men.

[89] *Cold Turkey* is a 1971 satirical comedy film produced by Tandem Productions. It stars Dick Van Dyke plus a long list of comedic actors. The film was directed, co-produced and co-written by Norman Lear and is based on the unpublished novel *I'm Giving Them Up for Good* by Margaret and Neil Rau. Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (Penguin Press, 2014), 177.

Tandem Productions' focus on television led to string of acclaimed television shows that continued to challenge the social milieu and call to attention the private sphere in the "typical" American household in discussions of politics, race, economics, among other issues. Tandem's shows challenged society's social conventions and were necessary for America to fully understanding the true milieu of the historical moment. Earlier television series employed a point of view that ignored these issues in order to hide harsh realities that privileged individuals were unwilling to confront regarding race, gender, sexuality, and class to name a few. As Lear himself noted in one of his autobiographies, television's silence on social issues was itself highly political because it tried to be apolitical. Before *All in the Family,* he writes, "for twenty years, TV comedy was telling us there was no hunger in America, no racial discrimination, no unemployment or inflation, no war, no drugs, and the citizenry was happy with whomever happened to be in the White House. Tell me that expressed no point of view!"[90] In describing the vast popularity of Tandem's productions, producer (and Tandem associate) Brad Lemack states that, "national ratings services statistics indicate that over half of the nation's population, as many as 120 million Americans, watch the television programs produced by the group [Tandem] each week."[91] With *All in the Family* securing the number one Nielsen rating throughout its run and *Sanford and Son, Good Times,* and *The Jeffersons* all securing top 5 positions next to it, it's clear that Tandem possessed network dominance.[92] The "painful laughter" that came along with the harsh realities of Lear's sitcoms were integral to their success. Explained by Lear, "comedy with something in mind works as a kind of intravenous to the mind and spirit.

[90] Ibid, 267.

[91] Lemack (Brad) Collection (PA Mss 58) p. 2.

[92] Ibid.

After he winces and laughs, what the individual makes of the material depends on that individual, but he *has* been reached."[93] Critics such as Michael Arlen however, were not as accepting of the comedies of Tandem's approach to comedy, categorizing them as "media dramas."[94] Arlen believed that the comedy in Lear's shows (except for the laugh-track) was mainly angry. Although his shows address various topical themes, Arlen felt these political themes were delivered to the public through the "snarling anger" of his characters, interrupted periodically by stage-business jokes or sentiment.[95] I do agree with Arlen's perspective that anger was often a means to address the social milieu. Tandem's later success with a mainstream audience for Black shows could not have been accomplished without the groundbreaking impact of Tandem's first sitcom and possibly its angriest protagonist, the fictional Archie Bunker in *All in the Family*. According to Lear, "*All in the Family* debuted and the career that had been launched years before we [Lear and Yorkin] met now reached the stratosphere."[96]

According to Lear, the show came about when he read an article in *Variety* magazine on *Till Death Do Us Part* (original run 1966-1968, second run 1972-1975) and its success in the United Kingdom.[97] In 1971 television producers Lear and Yorkin, working with CBS, developed the television show *All in the Family*. The sitcom chronicled the life and times of Archie

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[93] Ibid., 235.

[94] Arlen, Michael. "Media Dramas of Norman Lear" *The New Yorker*, 05/10/1975, p.163.

[95] Ibid., 164-165.

[96] Ibid., 203.

[97] Norman Lear" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews,* 02/26/1998. https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/norman-lear
Till Death Us Do Part centered on the East End of London Garnett family, led by patriarch Alf Garnett (Warren Mitchell), a reactionary white working-class man who holds racist, prejudiced and anti-socialist views. His long-suffering wife Else was played by Dandy Nichols, and his daughter Rita by Una Stubbs. Rita's husband Mike Rawlins (Anthony Booth) is a socialist layabout. Alf Garnett became a well-known

Bunker, a working-class bigot (played by Carroll O'Connor), his wife Edith Bunker (played by Jean Stapleton), their daughter Gloria Stivic (played by Sally Struthers), and their son-in-law Michael Stivic (played by Rob Reiner). Archie was an outspoken, narrow-minded White man, seemingly prejudiced against everyone who is not like him or his idea of how people should be. The two couples represent the real-life clash of values between the so-called Greatest Generation and Baby Boomers. For much of the series, the Stivics (whose values are influenced and shaped by the counterculture of the 1960's) live in the Bunkers' home to save money, providing abundant opportunity for them to irritate each other. *All in the Family* is often rated as one of the greatest television shows of all time. It became the first television series to reach the milestone of having topped the Nielsen ratings for five consecutive years.

To add to its production and artistic acclaim, in 2013, the Writer's Guild of America ranked *All in the Family* the fourth-best written TV series ever, and *TV Guide* ranked it as the fourth-greatest show of all time.[98] Although media and critics often critiqued Archie and his on screen persona, he was met with resounding praise by most viewers. In creating him Lear believed "the point of the character as to show that if bigotry and intolerance didn't exist in the minds of good people, the average people, it would not be the endemic problem it is in our society."[99] In essence, Archie was meant to symbolize an ordinary man sharing real life prejudices probably felt by many behind closed doors. Prejudices are integral to bringing important social ills and beliefs to discussion. Those who speak about these issues behind closed doors

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character in British culture, and Mitchell played him on stage and television until Speight's death in 1998.

[98] Fretts, Bruce; Roush, Matt. "The Greatest Shows on Earth." *TV Guide Magazine*, 2013.

[99] Ibid., 223.

are likely the audience that President Nixon is speaking to in his 1969 address to the "silent majority": honest and patriotic Americans who would support his policy of "Vietnamization" which provided for American troop reductions but a continuation of fighting in the Vietnam War.[100]

Although *All in the Family* is not the focus of my dissertation, it is integral to explaining how Tandem Productions created their characters and plots in their future Black sitcoms and the company's broader approach to race, class, ethnicity, and difference. At Tandem Productions, Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin grew their media prowess from the idea of the spinoff—exploiting success by transferring a character(s). As noted by Todd Gitlin, "if the single most important factor in series success is the appeal of its major characters, then it is logical to launch a show with characters whose appeal is pretested…when secondary characters are 'spun off' from current series to stand on their own, presumable they have already accumulated their followings on the road."[101] Spinoffs spring from the industry logic of putting capital to maximum use. Through the appeal of secondary characters, as well as the trusted name of Tandem attached to the product, after *All in the Family*, the spin off *Maude* was created, and then *Maude* begat *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons*. All of these shows are inextricably linked and detail a developmental arc of racial formation on network television. Before *All in the Family*, sitcoms were predominantly segregated and featured all White casts. *All in the Family* slowly integrated race marginally through its inclusion of the Jefferson family as the Bunker's neighbors. *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times* represented a somewhat separate but [un]equal portrayal of a family as they featured an all-Black cast but, their financial and social circumstances

[100] "Nixon's 'Silent Majority' Speech," 11/03/1969. http://watergate.info/1969/11/03/nixons-silent-majority-speech.html.

[101] Gitlin, Todd. *Inside Primetime*, University of California Press, 2000, p. 69.

were unequal to their White counterparts. Finally, *The Jeffersons* represented an integrated-privileged model in which although Black characters were in leading roles, *The Jeffersons* featured a racially integrated cast, all possessing financial privilege. This arc of racial formation is evident in the chronological production of these shows and their spinoffs. The only popular Black sitcom created by Tandem Productions outside of the spinoff world of *All in the Family* was *Sanford and Son*

Sanford and Son

> "…the time is just about right for a series that shows the other side of the American dream. If the time isn't right now, it never will be. Sure, it's a side of life that television hasn't showed much, but don't forget there are people like Fred Sanford in the country at home watching tele vision then there are like the folks you see on most other shows. These people can relate to the warmth of our show. To the small things that we're happy with." Redd Foxx on *Sanford and Son*[102]

In 1972, *Sanford and Son* drastically transformed the sitcom genre by introducing NBC's first all-Black cast television sitcom. Based on the BBC Television program, *Steptoe and Son* (1962-1974), in which Tandem paid for and licensed BBC intellectual property, *Sanford and Son* propelled an urban working-class Black family into the national spotlight. Similar to its Tandem Productions forbear, *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *Sanford and Son* focused on the everyday trials and tribulations of an elderly man, with one major difference: Fred Sanford (Redd Foxx) and his son Lamont (Demond Wilson) were Black—a separate but (un)equal racial arc that places Blackness at its center. What's unequal are the ways in which shows that center Whiteness, do so from a position of financial and racial privilege. *Sanford and Son*

[102] Adler, Dick. "Look What They Found in a Junkyard—the spare parts for a comedy series that breaks some new ground." *TV Guide*. New York, 05/13/1972.

chronicles the challenges they faced as poor businessmen running a junk and salvage yard in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, CA.

Inspired by Foxx's performance as a junk man in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin (Tandem Productions) believed that actor could become a national star. Following the success of *All in The Family* at CBS, Tandem pitched CBS the idea of *Sanford and Son*. After deliberation, CBS ultimately turned down the show. According to Lear, he and Yorkin snuck NBC executives into CBS studios wearing hats and sunglasses to discuss the show. Ultimately, NBC saw the potential and the show was in motion. With his focus primarily still on the success of *All in The Family*, Lear left much of the day-to-day production work on *Sanford and Son* to Yorkin.

Ultimately, *Sanford and Son* became a vehicle for Foxx's stand-up material, which he would adjust to comply with the confines, rules, and politics of national television. Until this point Foxx had been featured in small film spots but was primarily known for his very critical (for some his routine was offensive, rude, and raunchy) stand-up comedy shows and party records.[103] His move to the mainstream through television would be nothing short of an artistic transformation for any performer. Unlike Carroll O'Connor and the other White actors of Tandem who came from theater training, only the Black actors of Tandem came out of stand up. Much like Archie Bunker, Fred Sanford became renowned for his various racial epithets and prejudice directed at both Blacks and non-Blacks alike. Yet, the show also made clear that Sanford's bigotry was distinct from Bunker given the racial history in American and each man's own experiences. For Sanford, his experiences with American racism shaped his racial

[103] This comedy, known as Blue comedy, is humorous entertainment that ranges from bordering on indelicacy to gross indecency. As the Blue comedy scene was particularly a spaced reserved for Black comedians and audiences, for Lear to place Foxx from that space to the mainstream was an act never before seen in the television industry.

outlook. While Archie's racism is a tool of oppression, Fred's is reaction to it. Through the series, the narrative would highlight how his interactions with the government, law enforcement, and his inability to obtain healthcare, social security benefits, and countless more affronts would contribute to his prejudices and his belief in stereotypes.

In watching episodes of *All in the Family*, one never sees the Bunkers in financial crises; somehow, they are always stable with food to eat and a dependable roof over their heads. However, in *Sanford and Son* the circumstances were much different. Almost every episode dealt with the Sanford's facing the fear of being unable to pay rent, running a successful business, and not knowing if there would be enough food for the next meal, difficulties that their White counterparts never dealt with. Other than the show's content, the differences in production were also striking. While *All in the Family* took place in Queens, *Sanford and Son* took place in a Los Angeles community populated majorly by minorities, their costumes emulated rags of the urban working class, and the Sanford family lived and worked in the same place—their junkyard business. Also, this show brought about change in Blacks on television sets on screen and behind the scenes.

In many ways, *Sanford and Son* was in dialogue with popular representations, social science research, and political discourse that so often dehumanized and pathologized urban Black families. Challenging those who imagined the inner cities to be overrun with welfare recipients, criminals, and those in poverty, *Sanford and Son* highlighted a community made up of the working poor, which could be found throughout America. Yet, the show also reinforces widely held stereotypes about the cultural values and work ethic of single-parented homes. A widower, Fred Sanford had raised Lamont without a mother. At the same time, from their attire to their few precious belongings, the Sanford family exudes the image of poverty, created by White producers. Yes, both Archie Bunker and Fred Sanford are working class, however Fred

Sanford is also impoverished as his Blackness deprives him of access to financial stability and as he is placed within a larger community that shares the same socioeconomic struggle. Fred lives in a poor community and is in competition with other junk dealers; many of his friends are also Black and struggling financially (albeit, some Jewish friends, such as his fellow junk dealer, Goldstein); however, Fred is often made to be the butt of his own jokes and suffering, and the dialogue of a large amount of the episodes center on their predicament of being poor, Black, and lacking access to greater things. Strapped in dusty old work boots and a ripped jacket, at the beginning of everyday his son Lamont struggles to start the rusty pickup truck to make his daily junk collections. Meanwhile, Fred sits lazily at home complaining about his old age, his imaginary heart attacks, and his arthritis while seeking sympathy from his overworked and frustrated son.

Along with the Sanford, the recurring characters of the show embody the stereotypes of the Black urban poor. Among these characters is Fred's holy-roller sister in law (played by LaWanda Page), her alcoholic husband (played by Raymond Allen), and Fred's old pals (played by Whitman Mayo and blue comedians LeRoy and Skillet), who are unwilling to admit that they're old and spend their days watching television and drinking beer with Fred. Trapped by a culture of Black poverty, they all struggle to either make ends meet and secure the American Dream, although Fred is constantly trying to make it rich. Many episodes revolve around the possibility of Sanford, usually through some scheme, getting rich. His hope of transcending the confines of poverty usually comes crashing down. Finding humor in his failures, *Sanford and Son* recycles narratives that imagine Black America as failing to take the necessary steps to fulfill the American Dream.

With *Sanford and Son*, it is important to consider not only the politics of the show but also the politics of performance. On this show, Foxx masterfully adjusted his comedic artistry

to the confines, rules, and politics of national television.[104] Foxx brought aspects of the Black comedy performed in all-Black settings of the stand-up comedy circuit to this mainstream forum of network television and recruited many of his Chitlin' Circuit compatriots along with him as recurring and even special guests on *Sanford and Son* (namely, LaWanda Page, LeRoy, and Skillet).[105] His ability to bring to *Sanford and Son* artists and remnants of his own Black comedic tradition (ad-libbing, Black American dance forms, vernacular, etc.), points to the agency he was able to exercise in the production of the show. Through the use of vernacular Black comedy, ad-libs, etc. *Sanford and Son* specifically addressed a Black audience familiar with the tropes of Black comedy while crossing over to a wider mainstream White audience.[106] *Sanford and Son* remained NBC's most popular show from 1972-1973 through 1975-76. The popularity of the show arguably spawned other Black sitcoms, including *Roll Out* (1973-74), *That's My Mama* (1974-75), and *What's Happening!!* (1976-79).[107] However, except for *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons*, none would equal *Sanford and Son* in longevity or popularity. This crossover ability proved profitable for Tandem and their Black sitcoms to follow.

Good Times

> "My view is that we made comedy safe for reality. That reality included black people." Norman Lear on *Good Times* [108]

[104] Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 91.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid., 108.

[108] Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience* (Penguin Press, 2014), 267.

Only two years later (1974) with the increasing demand for shows on the Black experience because of the successes of *Sanford and Son*, Lear and Yorkin created another television show that discusses the everyday woes of the Black poor, a transition I cover more thoroughly in Chapter Three. *Good Times* is a development from *Sanford and Son* as it further worked to integrate (yet, still in a separate but (un)equal manner) Blackness into the mainstream, but through a nuclear family. Also featuring an all-Black cast, *Good Times* premiered in February 1974; high ratings led CBS to renew the program for the 1974–75 season, as it was the seventeenth-highest-rated program that year.[109] A spin-off from Tandem's popular sitcom *Maude* (1972-1978) (where Florida Evans was Maude's housekeeper), *Good Times* features a poor Black family living in the projects of the south side of Chicago, Illinois, the Evans family. Endowed with a great sense of humor, there are many laughs that accompany their harsh journeys struggling with poverty, joblessness, and inner-city crime all the while trying to keep their head above water. James constantly expressed his manhood and control over the household. To make ends meet, James worked odd jobs at all hours of the day and night; he was always overworked, underpaid, and stressed. Florida Evans, the family's matriarch, is the show's central character as the episodes revolve around her daily life. Florida spends her days taking care of her home and children as her husband works. Florida is the constant symbol of hope in the family, known for being spiritually in tune with the Lord and praying for His aid in their times of great struggle. J.J. is the Evans' oldest child, blessed with supreme artistic skill; he uses his art pieces for get rich quick schemes and extra cash to take girls on dates. Thelma, the Evans' only

[109] During its first full season on the air, 1974–75, the show was the seventh-highest-rated program in the Nielsen ratings, with more than 25% of all American households tuning into an episode each week. Three of the top ten highest-rated programs on American TV that season centered on the lives of African-Americans: *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, and *Good Times*. Brooks, Tim; Marsh, Earle. *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present* (Ninth Edition). Ballantine Books, 2007. p. 1687.

daughter, lacks the distinctiveness of the other characters, as her roles are mostly assisting her mother with household duties and keeping up with her beautiful image and she has fewer lines and episodes devoted to her. Michael, the youngest of the children, is a boy who is trapped in the spirit of 1960's civil rights and militancy. With aspirations of becoming a lawyer, he is constantly looked upon as the smartest member of the family. Last but not least, the supporting character of the show, Willona Woods (Ja'Net DuBois), is the Evans' next store neighbor and Florida's best friend. Beaming with beauty and energy, Willona's quick-witted humor acts as a powerful supporter to the Evans family.

Sporting natural Afros, speaking 1970s slang, and constantly referencing African American history, *Good Times* offers an additionally powerful Afrocentric flavor to its predecessor, *Sanford and Son*. Although they struggled with poverty, the idea of a Black nuclear family on television was a step in the right direction regarding how visual culture depicted Black life. This image of the strong Black family worked to counter Moynihan's research on "The Negro Family in America," which stated that Black American families lived off of the matriarch after the patriarch has walked out, divorced his wife, or was otherwise missing. Lear addressed his additional motive to portray such a strong family as a means to keep the Black cast members and writers that the show employed on the payroll. "I could be confessing to a bit of inverse racism here when I admit that it even pleased me to see them credited and paid. That would not have happened, at least not gratuitously, if they were white."[110] Through this quote, I believe Lear is addressing that this new wave of Black creatives being given the chance to be credited in television was a feat in it of itself. As White creatives have always been the dominant faces in the industry, these new Black faces required more executives to take notice to the ways in

[110] Lear, 269.

which creatives were credited and how much they were actually paid. Tandem's Black sitcom not only provided Black people a chance to appear on screen but also behind the scenes—two means of moving up the societal ladder. The idea of "moving up" was seen no clearer than in Tandem-T.A.T's *The Jeffersons*.

The Jeffersons

Continuing the arc of racial development throughout Tandem's shows, *The Jeffersons* moved towards an integrated-privileged representation of Blackness as it featured a wealthy Black family at its center and their daily interactions with White communities. Although produced through T.A.T. Communications, *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985) was the last show focusing on a majority Black cast before Lear and Yorkin ended their Tandem Productions partnership in 1975.[111] It was also a spin-off of Lear and Yorkin's first television creation, *All in the Family.* This last installment of Tandem (specifically Lear and Yorkin's partnership) took a drastically different form by portraying a Black family with money. Lear claims that "after a year and a half of *Good Times*, we [Tandem Productions] began to read, 'why are they all working 2-3 jobs, why can't they be fairly affluent, why can't there be another slice of Black life?'"[112] Hence, *The Jeffersons* was born as an answer to the criticisms of Tandem's earlier shows. The

[111] T.A.T. Communications was formed in 1974, when Norman Lear joined with former talent agent Jerry Perenchio, a year before Yorkin ended his partnership with Lear. Bud Yorkin was a part of The Jeffersons until Lear and Perenchio bought him out as Yorkin wanted to focus on making films. As a subsidiary of Tandem Productions, T.A.T. Communications was established for financial reasons as creative principals had changed. Much like the other off shoots of Tandem Productions where Yorkin and Lear worked with other collaborators, like T.O.Y. and Bud Yorkin Productions.
"Norman Lear" *Television Academy Interviews*, 1998. https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/norman-lear

[112] "Norman Lear" *Television Academy Foundation* 02/26/1998. https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/norman-lear

premise of *The Jeffersons* shows a unique approach to the Black situation in comparison to other Black sitcoms of Tandem.

The arrogant patriarch and main source of comedy was George Jefferson (Sherman Hemsley); while kind-hearted, he didn't shy from a fight with matriarch Louise "Weezy" Jefferson (Isabel Sanford), and their son Lionel Jefferson (*Good Times* Co-creator Mike Evans (Season 1, 6-11) and Damon Evans (Season 2-4)). The Jeffersons were the first Black family on television that wasn't impoverished. Mostly through the perspective of the protagonist George, this show's comedy lies in the "fish out of water" narrative of a Black family now placed in a space controlled by rich White people. A critical success in its first season, *The Jeffersons* consistently challenged the idea of Black ascension and upward mobility by continuously reminding the Jefferson family that although they have "moved on up" financially, their Blackness keeps them out of the culture of old money.[113] The show centers on the Jefferson family, who have been able to move from Queens (next door to the Bunkers of *All in the Family*) to the wealthy Upper Eastside of Manhattan owing to the success of George's dry-cleaner chain.[114] *The Jeffersons* eventually evolved into more of a traditional sitcom but with references to issues such as alcoholism, racism, suicide, gun control, being transgender, and adult illiteracy. The epithets "Nigger" and "Honkey" were used occasionally, especially during the earlier

[113] In its first season (1974–75), *The Jeffersons* ranked at number four, surpassed by its parent series *All in the Family* (which landed at number one for the fifth year in a row).
Wojciechowski, Michele "Wojo." "The Norman Lear Experience: His Shows, His Honesty, and One Thing He Wanted to Do." *Parade*. 07/28/2015

[114] To "move up" inherently means to succeed at whatever you are trying to pursue, usually referring to making more money, getting a great job, or simply doing better.

seasons.[115] [116] The other characters were George's mother, lovingly named Mother Jefferson (Zara Cully), their back-talking and lovable maid Florence (Marla Gibbs), and their ever-amusing British neighbor who worked at the United Nations, Harry Bentley (Paul Benedict). What also made this show so transformative to the Black image was that it was the first to prominently feature a married interracial couple in Helen Willis and Tom Willis (played by Roxie Roker and Franklin Cover, respectively).[117] George frequently attempted to insert himself into the culture of the elite and the bourgeoisie, by wearing three-piece suits tailored to fit, buying large musical instruments as furniture, having brunch, and tipping $20 bills to his doorman. However, his roots as a struggling Black man from the ghetto in Harlem are consistently referenced to him in the earlier seasons. Whether a humbling act or one meant to keep a Black man down even when he attains wealth, it's clear that money can't buy one's way fully into a society that wasn't built for them.

Bud Yorkin and Norman Lear are credited with the creations of *Sanford and Son, Good Times,* or *The Jeffersons*. These shows marked a new approach to the representation of Black people and Blackness. Robin Means Coleman writes: "in Black-centered worlds and through Black-oriented circumstances, a never seen before consciousness was added to the comedic discourse in which race, racism, class, and cultural differences were explored."[118] The Black sit-

[115] Leonard, David J.; Guerrero, Lisa. *African Americans on Television: Race-ing for Ratings*. ABC-CLIO, 2013.

[116] Cadet, Danielle. "'The Jeffersons': How Sherman Hemsley and the Sitcom Changed the Landscape of American Television," *The Huffington Post.* 07/25/2012.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Coleman, Robin Means. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*. Garland Publishing, 1998. p.94.

coms and the Black creatives of Tandem Productions were integral to this consciousness building as they complicated popular understandings of the Black situation in America. I made sure to not center on stereotypes or negative images because what we need is not a rejection of Black television but a reconstitution of it as an intellectual tradition and as a present-day politics, the television of this time is extremely relevant to the national politics of this time. "African American humor," in this case Black sitcoms specifically, "has been and continues to be both a bountiful source of creativity and pleasure and an energetic mode of social and political critique."[119] If television history is meant to help open up a way forward, it will need to encompass the multiple varieties of Black television aesthetics and images, past and present. Looking at the 1970's and Tandem Productions particularly, it is presently important to analyze the historical conditions of Black America and how those in power interpreted these conditions.

This dissertation is intended to give voice not just to Lear and Yorkin but to the Black actors, writers, producers, etc. who contributed on-screen and behind the scenes at Tandem Productions. Black actors and writers who were forced to contend with racism and ill-treatment at the hands of Hollywood executives and often put themselves and their careers on the line in order to contribute to the imagination of Blackness on television. These individuals fade into the periphery in discussion of television history because of their lack of authority in a largely racist industry. Without the authority and recognition as media change-makers none of these individuals hold the honor of a star on the coveted Hollywood Walk of Fame. Whether through a junkyard tale of a father and son struggling to make it, a loving family stricken with the ills of poverty in the projects, or a nouveau riche family fighting to balance their new lifestyle that wealth has afforded them, these Black sitcoms of Tandem are all about the situation of class.

[119] Ibid.

They are intertextually connected with the complex political backdrop of television during the 1970's, therefore, these Black artists, who are a part of this compelling vision, deserve recognition.

Chapter Two: *Sanford and Son*

Part 1: *"Hustle Economics"*

This chapter will consider the primetime influence and cultural impact of Tandem's *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977) from the perspectives of hustle economics, presence of Black women, and Black actor's dissent from executives. *Sanford and Son* was the first of Tandem's sitcoms to represent the Black domestic sphere and the struggles and its Black actors and writers used to show to reframe the ways in which Black communities existed on television. Analyzing *Sanford and Son's* cultural impact in terms of economics, characterizations of Black women, and moments of what I call "production dissent" will better aid in the understanding of this sitcom as more than a show, but a redefining moment in television history.

The combined efforts of the Kerner Commission's call to action and Black people being featured more prominently throughout different genres of television programming, begat *Sanford and Son* in 1972 as the first all-Black casted sitcom since *Amos'n' Andy* in 1953. Although *Sanford and Son* did indeed bring many more Black faces to television, Robin Means Coleman sees that *Sanford and Son* and other Tandem Black sitcoms were possibly the Kerner Commission's greatest nightmare.[120] Particularly, Coleman asserts that since Tandem's Black sitcoms deployed images of Blacks operating in separate and unequal worlds from Whites, that they are exactly what the Commission warned against.[121] Although the imagery in Tandem's Black sitcoms represented a segregated world from Whites, the existence of these sitcoms as a look into Black life and culture, that were formerly nonexistent on television, is in fact in line with the Commission's call for greater representation of the Black experience. The ways in

[120] Coleman, Robin Means. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy*, p. 94.

[121] Ibid.

which these Black families were written in comparison to their White sitcom counterparts is exactly why these images are so critically important.



Figure 1. Demond Wilson and Redd Foxx as Lamont and Fred Sanford.

Survival in Sanford's world required creativity. Whether it's through selling apples on the street corner, having a rent-party, or selling their own blood the cast of *Sanford and Son* discusses myriad ways they have devised to make ends meet throughout the series. To be clear, the fictionalized Fred Sanford of *Sanford and Son* was a business owner and entrepreneur who lived in his junkyard, much like Roc of the later series *Roc* (1991-1994) who lived with the

junk he collected on his garbage route. It is important to note that although he was an entrepreneur and business owner, Fred Sanford was consistently in a precarious predicament with regards to his insufficient finances and keeping his business afloat, often leading him to engaging with informal economies (i.e., lying, gambling, or blackmail). This reliance on informal economies worked to display that although a Black family may run a legitimate business and are contributing members of society, formal economies do not favor or work to the advantage of Black communities in the same way they may for their White counterparts on or off screen.

In this chapter, I discuss the ways that characters and communities in *Sanford and Son* must engage in what I call "hustle economics," that is, in efforts to get by and stay afloat. This includes but is not limited to the racialized informal economies of: under-the-table deals, lying, gambling, blackmail, favors, etc.[122] The word "hustle" or "hustler" are in line with the ways Black men have historically been identified in sitcoms even before *Sanford and Son*. For instance, in George Lipsitz's "The Meaning of Memory" he describes the main characters of *Amos n' Andy's* occupation as a "Cab Driver/Hustler."[123] As the characters often fell short in their participation in many "get rich quick schemes" their hustles were almost never actualized for long-term financial gain. A "hustler" is a go-getter who makes his money outside of formal occupations, mainly because their formal occupation income isn't lucrative enough to serve as a living wage. This casting of a Black man as a "hustler" is translated over time in *Sanford and*

[122] The informal sector of the economy is the part of the economy that is neither taxed nor monitored by any form of government, unlike the formal economy. The informal economy is often stigmatized as troublesome and unmanageable; however, it often provides critical economic opportunities for the poor. "The Informal Economy: Fact Finding Study." Department for Infrastructure and Economic Cooperation. Sida, 2004.

[123] Lipsitz, George. "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs" in eds. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, *Private Screening: Television and the Female Consumer*, University of Minnesota Press, 1992, p. 73.

Son. Within the 1970s televisual context, these various modes of economics are unique to the Black community and are integral to make ends meet, serving as critical counterparts to the modes of economic stability that White communities and families generally have access to on American television. Representing Black people resorting to and practicing these informal economies faces the potential problem of reinforcing popular negative representations of Black life; however Black "hustle economies" are represented, if comedically, as a matter of survival and a demonstration of resilience. Even when these modes of economic security or advancement fail, these Black characters demonstrate the capacity to recover quickly from these difficulties, a steadfastness and resilience necessary for them to keep their heads above water and try again.

As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, Black visual culture consistently mines its historical roots through various art forms. Of those recycled and reimagined narrative traditions is the tale of the trickster. The trickster is the linked to informal economies and Sanford embodies many elements of this trickster tradition. The trickster is important here as it is a commonly used mode or performance in the practice of hustle economics. The history of the "trickster" follows folklore dated back to African Diasporic traditions that pre-dated American slavery.[124] The tradition started in West Africa in the form of a tricky spider named Anansi. This West African God frequently takes the form of a spider and holds the knowledge of all of the folktales and stories; he is cunning and tricky and uses his cunning guile to try to get what he wants. The stories made up an exclusively oral tradition, and indeed Anansi himself was synonymous with skill and wisdom in speech. These tales crossed to the Caribbean and other parts of the New

[124] Watkins, Mel. O*n the Real Side: Laughing, Lying and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor*, Simon and Schuster, 1994, p. 167.

World with captives via the Atlantic slave trade.[125] Anansi is often celebrated as a symbol of slave resistance and survival. As historian Lawrence Levine argues in *Black Culture and Consciousness*, enslaved Africans in the New World devoted "the structure and message of their tales to the compulsions and needs of their present situation."[126] Tricksters are often disadvantaged characters who create and adhere to moral codes that are not traditionally accepted. These codes require them to use their wit to outsmart their more advantaged opponents. By definition, like the popular folktale, Brer Rabbit, "tricksters are animals or characters who, while ostensibly disadvantaged and weak in a contest of wills, powers, and/or resources, who succeed in getting the best of their larger, more powerful adversaries."[127] [128] In essence, Brer Rabbit and similar stories about tricksters were meant to instill faith and pride in characters who used their wits or trickery in order for these historically disadvantaged figures to get over on those who historically displayed hegemonic power over them.

During slavery, trickster tales with human characters reflected the actual behavior of the

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[125] James, Cynthia. "Searching for Ananse: From Orature to Literature in the West Indian Children's Folk Tradition—Jamaican and Trinidadian Trends," Trinidad University of the West Indies, 2004.

[126] Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 90.

[127] Harris, Trudier. "The Trickster in African American Literature" http://nationalhumanities-center.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/trickster.htm

[128] Brer Rabbit, as the primary African American trickster may have been an adaptation of the African cunnie rabbit, a small deer, and/or of Anansi, the well-known African spider trickster. Animals that appear frequently in the tales about Brer Rabbit, such as elephants and lions, are also believed to be African transplants, since these animals are not native to the United States. From these adaptations, enslaved African Americans created worlds in which animal actions mirrored human actions during and after slavery. Their kinship to fables thus enabled the seriousness of the tales to be overlooked at times. That is one way to explain the popularity of Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus* stories, which were first published in 1881. Bre'r Rabbit or Brer Rabbit or Bruh Rabbit, is a central figure as Uncle Remus tells stories of the Southern United States. Br'er Rabbit is a trickster who succeeds by his wits rather than by brawn, provoking authority figures and bending social mores as he sees fit.

people telling/hearing stories about slaves who challenged the dominant order. Lawrence Levine notes, "a significant number of slaves lied, cheated, stole, feigned illness, loafed, pretended to misunderstand the orders they were given, put rocks in the bottom of their cotton baskets in order to meet their quota."[129] These tales during slavery and for decades after, with their subtlety and indirection, were—and are—necessary because Black people could not risk a direct attack on White people that might result in meant pain, punishment, or death. Tricksters are self-consciously aware of their manipulation and they recognize, as they are reminded every day, of the differences between them and their victims. They engage in trickery to overcome social inequality. While frequently humorous, trickster tales often convey serious social critiques, and serve as "serious commentary on the inequities existence in a country where the promises of democracy were denied to many."[130] Tricksters claim these inequities or perceived weaknesses to their advantage to come out ahead in the end, even if said success is brief. These tales are largely narratives of triumphs in battles, rather than winning the larger societal war. That is, although the slave may have lied, cheated, stole, etc. to make their quota and satisfy their owners for that day, they are still trapped within the confines of slavery. The tales in fact, represent a persistence or resilience, with the oppressed subject using whatever she/he may possess in order to live.

The trickster also falls short along its paths of trickery. As these tales were historically told in secret to other slaves or historically disadvantaged peoples, they represent narratives that reinforce community moral codes of unity. It is integral to point out that within this mythology when the disadvantaged use their trickery on another disadvantaged person, their trickery will

[129] Trudier Harris quoting Lawrence Levine in "The Trickster in African American Literature" http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/trickster.htm

[130] Ibid.

often be reversed on to them. In order to survive or stay afloat, at times, Black people may be forced to conform to lying, cheating, deception, or trickery in often comedic ways. In this way, the trickster tradition has evolved over time from West African traditions, to U.S. chattel slavery, to a mode of performance in popular art forms such as television.

Understanding this cultural tradition evolving over time benefits by highlighting the ways in which Brer Rabbit tales are transcribed and commodified by other creators, including Joel Chandler Harris. Although operating in different time periods, Harris functioned in a similar fashion to White writers/producers in Tandem Productions who served alike as intermediaries and filters of representations of Blackness and the "mainstream" public. As Mel Watkins claims, around the 1950s, "Black comedians turned to their own folk roots to add another dimension to their stage humor. They clearly began their acts with motifs derived from the trickster tales that dominated slave humor."[131] The Black comic sensibility of the trickster was fully unleashed in the stage routines of comedians such as Moms Mabley, Dick Gregory, Flip Wilson, and of course Redd Foxx.[132] These examples of the trickster in these stand-up comedy routines became a point of reference for the writers and creators at Tandem to construct narratives about their Black characters—specifically Redd Foxx in his portrayal of Fred Sanford. To be clear, main characters often scheme and plot to get ahead and the trickster as well as engagement in informal economies also exists in sitcoms starring White characters. For example, Ralph Kramden in almost every episode of *The Honeymooners*. However, the trickster in Black sitcoms often is made to engage in informal economies and trickery specifically because of their race and racial discrimination, and it is often their race that allows them to successfully

[131] Watkins, Mel. *On the Real Side*, p. 167-168.

[132] Ibid., 168.

scheme.

In "The Great Sanford Siege" episode Fred's failure to pay his bills brings a collection agency that threatens to turn off his utilities and repossess his furniture.[133] The episode starts with Lamont walking into the house with a handful of mail, complaining that it's obviously the first of the month due to all of the bills. The collection of bills is impressive and includes gas, electric, telephone, and credit bills that they have accrued at the drug store and the grocery store. Also, within these bills is the demand for payment from the "Luau Layaway Furniture Company," an establishment from which the Sanford's rent every piece of their furniture. Frustrated with the multiple "final notice" stamps, Lamont asks his father, "Why haven't you paid the bills, aren't they coming on time?" A sarcastic Fred responds, "Yeah the bills come on time but there's been a slight delay in the money." Fred's response here leads to an uproar of laughter from the studio audience; however, the humor in this quick one-liner is much more layered than it appears and harder to decipher. The line is funny to some because of Foxx's (as Fred) timing, his serious tone, and the stone-face he's able to maintain.

Admittedly, that is what I believe first caused me to laugh at *Sanford and Son*—namely, Fred's deadpan humor that is always met with Lamont's sternness. More importantly, this exchange produces a feeling of discomfort as it is particularly relatable to working class Black communities with similar financial hardships during this time. Speaking subtly about Black economics in ways like this is very particular to the Black sitcom model of Tandem that is not translated the same way in White sitcoms. For instance, Archie in *All in the Family* would not face a collection agency repossessing his belongings; his Whiteness allows him a certain social capital to own the furniture in his home. Although "working class" like Fred, Archie's job as a

[133] *Sanford and Son* Season 1 Episode 8 "The Great Sanford Siege" by: Aaron Ruben 03/03/1972.

unionized loading dock foreman offers him a level of financial stability and steady income; in contrast, Fred is a capitalist who owns his own small business, but he is barely surviving. Additionally, both characters are never shown working, which is particularly striking in Fred's case as his business is run out of his home. These contradictions complicate the shared class status of the two men and bring attention to the fact that the White character's race adds to his social capital. Laughing at Fred's predicament here, for many Black audience members, is what Glenda Carpio calls a "wrested freedom," the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community.[134] For many, there's pain in the laughter that comes here, the pain of a struggling economic reality that ironically the laughter will (we hope) help to ease. The artistry and writing here is genius as it's able to call attention to temporal injustices, in such a quick-witted way that without pause for reflection many will fail to grasp.

Having no way of being able to pay the bills, Fred suggests putting the bills back into the mailbox so it seems as if they never received them. Upon Lamont's evident frustration, Fred reaches into his obviously empty pocket and states, "Son, our budget is in serious trouble." Meanwhile, a White process server with a court order to repossess all of their furniture approaches their door. Unwilling to let him inside, Lamont and Fred must wait him out hoping that he leaves. With the phone, gas, and electricity now being off, the Sanfords are forced to wait out the situation from inside their home. Returning to the Sanford home with two police officers, the process server again demands that they open the door. Finally letting them enter the house, while Lamont discusses the possibility of a payment plan, Fred attempts to reason with the Black police officer via racial identification saying, "You a brotha', why you gonna

[134] Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of* Slavery, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 1-2.

take our stuff…why don't you get a respectable job?" Stated in a comedic tone, Fred uses this term "respectable" to hint at a complicated history of Black men working in law enforcement. A job that often requires them to be seen as the enemy or less than respectable to their poor Black counterparts, as Black police officers are often forced to arrest other Blacks, gun them down, or in this case, repossess their belongings. After failing to reason with the officer, Fred and Lamont whisper to one another as the audience sees that Fred fakes that the process server pushed him down the stairs. Not seeing the altercation take place, the officers warn the process server that Fred may have a strong case of "attempted murder," and if he doesn't want to go to court, he should attempt to make a deal with the Sanford's. Begging that they don't take him to court, the process server relieves the Sanford's of their debt and gives them an extra $200 dollars for "hospital expenses." Exaggerating the fake injury that he experienced, Fred loudly moans and groans in pain combining the verbal with the physical in his exertion of the trickster. After the process server apologizes and leaves, the Sanford's rejoice after successfully manipulating the system and sticking it to the man.

Across the show's five-year life, one can see the themes that Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin constantly recreate throughout the series in their depiction of poor urban Blacks. One of the most prominent themes is the lack of financial security and the reluctance of paying bills. At the end of each episode somehow the Sanford family remains in their cycle of poverty, hoping that luck, such as in the episode discussed, will somehow again work in their favor. Like the trickster Brer Rabbit, there is no true end to the quotidian situations that will require Fred to muster up his creativity and hustle out of a hardship, as his survival depends on it. This example however is a story of trickery written by a White Tandem producer (Aaron Reuben). As a rewrite from the British show that spawned *Sanford and Son*, *Steptoe and Son* (1962-1974), the episode "The Great Sanford Siege" is actually based on the *Steptoe and Son* episode "The

Siege of Steptoe Street." Although the plot follows the same basic narrative of the father and son facing a collection agency and resorting to trickery to stay afloat, how this trickery is established with the White characters in *Steptoe* is different from how it is cast in *Sanford and Son*. In "The Siege of Steptoe Street," amidst bill collectors repossessing their furniture, the son (Harold) doesn't attempt to reason with them and willingly lets them price the furniture. With the camera focused on Harold, the audience hears screaming and the father (Albert) falling down the stairs off screen. Harold actually thinks that Albert has hurt himself, and it isn't until they are paid off that Harold (and the audience) realizes that Albert was faking it. Although trickery isn't particularly a racial act, when Black characters practice it the audience is involved in the collective hustle that the Black characters are initiating on scene. While, White tricksters performing tricks are kept out of sight and more subtle—even the way they trick is somewhat more acceptable as its hidden from plain view. As a White producer rewrote this episode to frame Black hustle/trickery in *Sanford and Son*, their small changes such as these make it seem as though Black trickery is more commonplace and expected. This begs curiosity to the ways in which Black writers visualized tropes of comedic Blackness and forms of hustle economics once they entered the mainstream.

As *Sanford and Son* became more entrenched in the NBC schedule, Lear and Yorkin hired more Black writers and script editors, giving them opportunities to play more active roles in the production of this show and others at Tandem. Though the show had two White producers, changes of scripts created and edited by Black writers, coupled with Foxx's incorporation of Black performance and Chitlin' Circuit actors, brought about considerable modification in the show's overall direction and tone. From communal issues of everyday racism, problems with police, lack of job opportunities, inner-city communities were given a more intimate voice

in the scripts on *Sanford and Son* once Black writers entered the writing room. Notable comedians such as Richard Pryor and Paul Mooney were among the new collective of Black writers displaying a clear political agenda for network television to be witness. This agenda is set forth in many ways, one important place is the use of the words *nigger* and *honkey* brought to mainstream television. The terms were shifted from being taboo or derogatory to showing an authenticity of the language used in all Black spaces/settings. I see these instances at times as a nod from Black writers communicating directly to Black audiences, albeit through the antics of Fred Sanford. The use of the trickster and his performance of practicing hustle economics is also seen in a different way at the hands of Black writers.

For example, in "The Dowry" Richard Pryor and Paul Mooney write a script that fully embraces the spirit of a tricky hustler setting up a plot for financial gain.[135] When Fred's cousin Grady comes to visit, Fred and Grady develop a plan for Lamont and Grady's new step-daughter (Betty Jean) to be wed. This idea is created once Fred realizes that whomever weds Judy stands to receive a $10,000 dowry on their wedding day, and of course Fred wants a piece of that small fortune. When Grady and his new family visit, Fred and Lamont joke and laugh at Judy's weight and general appearance. However, once Grady informs Fred of the dowry, Fred's tune changes and he begins to use deception in order to urge Lamont to consider marrying her. Fred's con begins the very next morning with making Lamont his favorite breakfast in order to distract him.

Fred: You might think I'm crazy for saying this but, I wouldn't mind having Betty Jean for a daughter in law. (*the camera zooms in on Lamont mid chews he pauses in confusion*)
Lamont: Have you been in the Apple Jack this morning?
Fred: You can learn to love her. Love conquers all, even fat.

[135] *Sanford and Son* Season 2 Episode 3 "The Dowry" by: Richard Pryor and Paul Mooney, 09/29/1972.

In this brief exchange, Fred attempts to coax Lamont with lies and treats for his own future financial gain. Lamont assumes Fred has been drinking early in the morning as that is the only way he could make such claims. In the conclusion of the episode Lamont and Betty Jean figure out the deception of their fathers and fake their own engagement as payback. When a sinister Fred and Grady think that their plan has come to fruition, they rejoice until Lamont mentions that the two newlyweds would move to St. Louis. Once the trickster (Fred) is tricked, he becomes victim to his own scheme, and he ruins the idea of the two marrying.

Later in the series, another Black writer, Odie Hawkins, focused the episode on hustle economies as the Sanfords are in a financial bind and try to raise money by throwing a rent party in "The Big Party" (Season 2 Episode 15). This episode highlights a Black cultural tradition dating back at least to Harlem in the 1920s where tenants hire a musician or band to play and pass the hat to raise money to pay their rent.[136] These parties played a major role in community engagement, financial support, and socialization. Facing the first of the month, Lamont bemoans, "Pop, we aint gonna make it… we got thirty bucks between us and we got bills here that total over two hundred dollars." Fred reluctantly agrees, "We aint gonna make it." As they deliberate on options to pay rent, Lamont even mentions them possibly going on welfare, in which Fred proudly responds, "Watch your mouth! Fred Sanford on relief? Never!" His pride here doesn't allow Fred to use formal government resources for financial aid, resources he considers to be a handout. This tells us something crucial about the show's approach to poverty. As it seems to denigrate the idea of being on welfare. Though poverty can be shown, the help that the Great Society provided is not something a proud Black man should indulge in, according to the show's ideological position, which is also seen with John Amos' character in *Good Times*

[136] Harlem Rent Parties, (The Library of Congress excerpt). https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/progress/prohib/rent.html

(see Chapter Three "Gettin' Up the Rent"). This seems like a nod to conservative viewers as the networks had to take them into account as well in the network era when the viewership in prime time was large. Even when Lamont explains the benefits of welfare being meant for people like them, Fred fights against it.

Lamont: What do you think we pay taxes for? We would just be taking advantage of something that is set up for people like us.
Fred: What's that mean? People like us?
Lamont: Well you know, poor people, the have-nots.
Fred: Have-nots? Well, say the haves gave the have-nots half of what they have, then the haves will still be the haves, and the have-nots will be the have-somethings.

Although set up through a comedic delivery, Odie Hawkins uses this exchange to comment on a larger socioeconomic issue regarding the concentration of finances with the rich and how it might that trickle down to the poor. Hawkins uses this joke to state a critique of class and the distribution of wealth, giving a solution that the rich who have the financial means can grant opportunity to those who don't by giving a portion of their money to the poor. This redistribution of wealth would in turn (in theory) eliminate the need for welfare programs and government assistance and rid the category of "have-nots." The comedy here lightens the delivery; however, the message still rings clear.

After considering going to such lengths as selling apples on the street corner or even selling blood, Fred comes up with the idea to use their last thirty dollars to buy food and drink and sell it to patrons at a house party. As Fred says, "Ya know, like them old Harlem rent parties." Rather than pursuing more formal means (such as welfare or payment extensions), the informal economy of the rent party is their chosen route of hustle. Although they make the required funds, gangsters show up and force them to make their home into an endless party that Fred manages. In the conclusion of the episode, Fred calls on his sister in law nemesis, Aunt Esther, to bring her church friends through the home and raid the gangsters out.

Hustle economics often work for Fred and Lamont but, the show's success is predicated on the characters' failure, suggesting that the trickster must be tricked in order for the show to go on. The instances of hustle economics in *Sanford and Son* are largely important because whether written by a Black *or* White writer, figures of the Black community are predestined to fail for the sake of comedy. Although Fred and Lamont are dedicated members of the work-force and in fact own their own business, profitability or business success is never an episodic focus and involvement in the formal economies of capitalism seem to not be enough nor to be in favor of Black communities, so they must often break from the formalities. It seems as though the Sanford's business is often what pulls them further into financial ruin. These various examples make it arguable whether formal economies are meant to allow Black communities to thrive. Their inability to earn profits by selling junk forces them to contend in an economic model that only works for the short term—earning just enough to allow them to get by until the next bill is due. This consistent focus on the trickster narrative disrupts the possible redemptive imagery of Blacks on television that the show had the ability to create. As the first show to feature an all-Black cast in over twenty years, the consistent focus on the financial woes of the Sanford family set a precedent that even the working class Black citizens of society who attempt to own their own businesses and "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," do not have the capacity to do so without resorting to the informal and often criminal to get by. Through *Sanford and Son*, Black families are seen as static, shiftless, often criminal, and overly masculine. The overwhelming majority of these instances of trickery and engaging in informal economics is seen through the actions of Black men on the show. As a sitcom that primarily chronicles the life and occurrences of two Black men, the masculinity in the show often overshadows the space, place, and representations of the Black women on *Sanford and Son*.

Part 2: Spiritual, Present, and Sometimes Heard: Black Women and *Sanford and Son*

"The new Black visibility can be noticeably traced to the unsophisticated world of situation comedy. Three comedy series built around Black characters are among the most popular programs currently on TV, and all three come out of the phenomenal Norman Lear factory"[137]

As the *New York Times* suggests, since the introduction of *All in the Family* on network television, it is clear that Tandem Productions worked as a "factory." Consistently producing images and shows that played off of, spun off of, or were linked to one another, Tandem Productions put into play a particular politics of representation that they consistently produced and sold, especially in regard to gender politics on screen and behind the scenes. With Tandem being founded and run by two White men, alongside a majority White staff, it is important to question what is at stake in the production and display of Black communities and people with such a privileged and masculine space controlling much of (Black) popular culture. As a "factory," Tandem Productions produced multiple shows that served to depict life and the social milieus of the 1970s. Through *All in The Family*, *Maude*, or *Sanford and Son*, there are distinct styles and formats through which the Tandem factory chooses to (or doesn't) portray identities on screen and behind the scenes. When it comes to women's onscreen depictions in Tandem's television series', each show has specific images and characterizations. Yet, at this particular moment in history, Black television in general, and Tandem's shows specifically offered even less diversity of roles to Black women than they did to Black men, offering few images of Black women on screen and close to zero credits behind the scenes in production. My particular concern here is with how television programming has contributed to the cultural conversation about Black women in this country during this historical moment.

[137] O'Connor, John J. "TV View: Good Times for the Black Image" *The New York Times*, 02/02/1975. The three sitcoms referred to in this quote are *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons.*

Scholarly discussion has never focused on Black women in *Sanford and Son*. But such dialogue is crucial to understanding just how much race and gender has influenced imagery and production through television history and the roots at which these changes came to fruition. As a show that focuses on the daily trials and tribulations of Fred and Lamont Sanford, much of scholarship on *Sanford and Son* focuses on the characterizations of Black men and masculinity. The Black women in this show have been treated as nonexistent, however their presence—and absence—plays a large role in the show's tone, direction, and characterization of the main male characters. With *Sanford and Son* scarcely discussed in Lear collections and a lack of archive regarding the Black women who were a part of the series, I am working around archival absences and filling the gaps, often via intertext and partatext when available (textual analysis episodes, fan mail, comedy albums, magazine articles), to create a narrative about the Black women and their roles on and in *Sanford and Son.*

I intend to set this discussion against the background of assessment of other images of Black women on television in this moment. What do they look like? What is their role? What is their typical age? Class? Marriage status? Employment? Next, I will discuss how, in *Sanford and Son* specifically, the role of Black womanhood and expectations of Black women that have been built on screen, at Tandem, and in society at large. In the 1970's popular cultural context, being a woman often meant adhering to social norms of femininity, such as being nurturing, caring, social, emotional, vulnerable, and concerned with appearance, with the pretense of assuming "appropriate" roles.[138] Although this image is popular throughout representations of women, regardless of race, as always, an intersectional understanding is vital and it is important

[138] Dow, Bonnie, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, p. xix.

to be mindful that what is culturally regarded as the epitome of femininity is White, middle class, youthful, and heterosexual—which counters much of what we see from the Black women in Tandem sitcoms and on *Sanford and Son* specifically.[139] As Patricia Hill Collins states, "U.S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female," and this world comes in various forms.[140] Since it would be reductive to suggest there is a single norm for Black womanhood, it is important to analyze the ways in which this fluidity of identity regarding Black women specifically is addressed at Tandem. I agree with Bonnie Dow's study on feminism in primetime television that, "feminists critics have rightly argued that television representations of women always have implications for feminism, and valuable critical work has emerged from that perspective."[141] However, here I am more specific as my purpose is to focus on television produced during the second wave of feminism (1966-1982), in which television seeks to offer progressive portrayals of women.[142] In particular, I am interested in if Black women in Black sitcoms, like *Sanford and Son*, of this second wave moment are included in these so-called progressive portrayals of women and how, in primetime television specifically.

I align my theories of gender politics outside of the binaries of man-woman, male-female, masculine-feminine, as they are counterproductive to the many identities that humans

[139] Breines, Winifred. "Struggling to Connect: White and Black Feminism in the Movement Years," Contexts, Winter 2007.

[140] Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge, 2000, p. 23.

[141] Dow, Bonnie, *Prime-Time Feminism,* p. xxiii.

[142] Ibid.

identify as, while considering performativity of gender. A clear gender binary and gender normativity is very much at play throughout Tandem, which in turn counters other gender and sexuality possibilities. In analyzing Tandem's sitcoms however, one must read them within the binary and heterosexuality that Tandem sets forth in the great majority of its programming. To understand how Tandem's construction of Black gender politics critiques, challenges, and complicates the industry's approach to race and gender it is important to set the scene of the temporal moment.

Imagining a Space for Women

> "Male opponents in the senate called it the unisex amendment, saying it would destroy traditional man and woman relationships, weaken familial ties, and increase homosexuality…"[143]
>
> Paul Duke, NBC News
> RE: The Equal Rights Amendment

> "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speak ing profits me, beyond any other effect."[144]
>
> Audre Lorde

> "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."[145]
>
> Audre Lorde

In the early 1970s, women's rights organizations such as The National Organization of Women and the Women's Liberation Movement, rallied and fought to seek political, economic, and social reform that treated them as equal amongst the present gendered hierarchy. The Equal

[143] "Battle of the Sexes," Episode 6 in CNN's *The Seventies*.

[144] Lorde, Audre. "'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action', 1977" in *Sister Outsider*, Crossing Press, 1984, p. 40.

[145] Lorde Audre. "Learning from the '60s," an address made to Harvard University in February, 1982. https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1982-audre-lorde-learning-60s/.

Rights Amendment, as legislation guaranteeing women protection and rights equal to those of their male counterparts, was a triumph of this struggle. Unfortunately, the ERA failed and was never passed, and this "equality" took decades to be largely accepted—and arguably it still has not been fully accepted. As the quotation from Paul Duke above suggests, many men in power were leery of an amendment giving the "second sex" such rights as they feared it would crumble the fabric of the established American society. Most of the challenges to the amendment were not truly political, but more of a larger cultural opposition, as men saw this as threatening of gendered power dynamics.

This moment is of great importance because it made even more clear that women had voices and agency of their own, however, these voices were few and far between as the discourse around so many of their issues was controlled by men. Although written at different times, both of the quotes above by Black feminist poet Audre Lorde speak to a larger understanding of the importance of Black women's voices being heard and shared, but also that they must be able to use those voices to have a role in defining themselves so that their narratives aren't misunderstood. Women had some voice in television production at this moment, and at Tandem Productions those women were White. For instance, women such as Jane Murray (Casting Director for 135 *Sanford and Son* episodes), Rita Riggs (Costume Designer for 84 *Sanford and Son* episodes), and Joni Rhodes (Script Supervisor for 65 *Sanford and Son* episodes) played integral roles in the production of *Sanford and Son*. Television producers were soon moved to attempt to respond to this changing social climate. The beginning of this process happened in 1970, a watershed year in American second-wave feminism and in American prime-time television.[146] Through Bonnie Dow's study of feminism on television, *Prime-Time*

[146] Dow, Bonnie, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996. p. xvi.

Feminism, evinces that the years between World War II and 1970 were not, as has sometimes been claimed, a time of total and untroubled acceptance of traditional gender roles. Instead they were a time where the complex relationships among television entertainment, news media, and women's magazines created a framework through which television viewers made sense of both the medium's portrayal of feminism and the nature of feminism itself. She maintains, however, that the debut of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) and a "wave of media attention to women's liberation in 1970 marked a qualitative shift in public consciousness of the presence of an organized feminist movement."[147] Prior to this, prime-time television's preferred mode of representing women was as contended housewives.[148] *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, came from CBS's desire for the star insurance of Mary Tyler Moore brought with her from her time on the celebrated *Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966).[149] With the high ratings of *Dick Van Dyke*, CBS asked Mary Tyler Moore to create and star in her own show, guaranteeing thirteen episodes for the 1970 season, which she was able to produce through her own independent company, MTM Enterprises.[150] With its focus as the intelligent and competent single working woman on screen and with a woman at its helm of production Bow contends (and I am inclined to agree), that "*Mary Tyler Moore's* greater longevity, the greater maturity and autonomy of its lead character,

[147] *Prime-Time Feminism*, xvi.

[148] To be clear, I am speaking particular about women's representations on prime-time television. More broadly, through the Black Arts Movement happening concurrently, Black women were visible in multiple public affairs and local television shows such as *Soul!* These public affairs programs were made by and for Black people and they featured Black women as performers, artists, and even hosts. These fluid representations are evidenced in Devorah Heitner's *Black Power TV.* Duke University Press, 2013.

[149] Feuer, Jane "MTM Enterprises: An Overview" in *MTM 'Quality Television*,' eds. Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi. British Film Institute, 1984. p. 5.

[150] Ibid.

and its timing in relation to the women's liberation movement made it, then and now, television's breakthrough feminist representation."[151] The issue here is that feminist representation leaves out Black women, similar to the early women's liberation movement. As Winifred Breines discusses in her article, "Struggling to Connect: White and Black Feminism in the Movement Years," the accepted explanation for the Whiteness of the feminist movement was that it was composed of women who were ignorant about racism and the problems that women of color faced.[152] "Because of their white, middle-class privilege, most early feminists, even those who were radical, socialist, and dissenters from the status quo, created a feminism in Black women…were unwelcome and uncomfortable."[153] As addressed with MTM, women did in fact exist on the production side of television with a large influence, but with regards to Tandem Productions, and *Sanford and Son* specifically, few women had production credits with great impact, none of these women were Black. With the lack of Black people in general and lack of Black women as a whole on the production side of Tandem, there was a lot at stake regarding who is creating their television narratives on Black women.

With regards to Tandem, Lear and Yorkin's theme of art with a social justice purpose, in theory, works in alignment with the changes that the Equal Rights Amendment sought. With the employment of a handful of women at Tandem, the company seemingly does its due diligence at the production level. In addition, with shows like *Maude*, Tandem gave liberal White women a voice (through Bea Arthur's Maude Findlay character) but also comically addressed

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[151] *Prime-Time Feminism*, xvii.

[152] Breines, Winifred. "Struggling to Connect: White and Black Feminism in the Movement Years," Contexts Winter 2007.

[153] Ibid.

the issues women were facing in a male-dominated nation. However, as was the case with *Maude* and among the women that Tandem employed in production, White women largely engineered and controlled this second wave of feminism.[154] Further pushed towards silence were the voices of Black women, who were often in the background of these larger women's organizations.[155] This is even more evident through Tandem's *Sanford and Son* where a majority of White male writers and producers wrote the dialogue and therefore often controlled the woman's voice.

With much of the archival material and trade journal coverage addressing the turmoil suffered from the male staff and actors suffered on Tandem's shows, at times it is unclear on whether these shows' women ever had the opportunity to speak for themselves. In fact, the disproportionate attention given to the men in Tandem's shows begs the question of whether the women of Tandem faced issues similar to those men raised regarding sufficient pay, wanting a stake in writing credits, and better working facilities.[156] The male actors of *Sanford and Son* (Redd Foxx in particular) were finally granted some agency, voice, attention, and a platform to address their production concerns—concerns that were soon validated and acceded to.[157] Where is the voice of Black women in this show? As Angela Davis firmly stated, "to understand how

[154] Breines, Winifred. "Struggling to Connect: White and Black Feminism in the Movement Years," Contexts, Winter 2007.

[155] Ibid.

[156] Davidson, Bill. "Trouble in Paradise." *TV Guide*. New York, April 6th, 1974. Microfilm.

[157] Ibid.

any society functions you must understand the relationship between the men and the women."[158]

Like Judith Butler, in her discussions surrounding the complications and often trouble society faces in defining and interpreting gender in *Gender Trouble*, I believe that societal views of gender are based primarily on performance. To quote her at length,

> "…gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an 'internal' feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, a hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures."[159]

With this understanding of gender performance as a set of acts and bodily stylization, with regards to this topic, it is imperative to discuss how this performance is practiced and constructed when race is added to the discussion of gender. Butler aids the understanding that race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies. In fact, "the sexualization of racial gender norms calls to be read through multiple lenses at once, and the analysis surely illuminates the limits of gender as an exclusive category of analysis."[160] The ways that White women perform and contend with gender norms are strikingly different than the ways in which Black women do, and I will use *Sanford and Son* here as my lens to read these racial gender performances and politics.

In contrast to White women and their performance of gender and femininity, Black women's oppression is intersectional. In their "Black Feminist Statement," the Combahee River Collective insists, "We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy, is as pervasive in

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[158] https://www.thoughtco.com/angela-davis-biography-3528285

[159] Butler, Judith *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge Classics, 2006, p. xvi

[160] Ibid., p. xvii

Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also find it difficult to separate race from class and from sex oppression, because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously."[161] A major source in the difficulty of Black women to define themselves and their own politics is that they are in a daily battle of multiple oppressions. Not having racial, sexual, or often class privilege to rely upon, there is minimal access to resources and platforms, counter to those of privilege not fighting these multiple oppressions. Through the means of television and media performance, these many oppressions are often seen as restrictive factors in production and on screen performance of Black women. As questioned by the Combahee River Collective, can Black women use their position at the bottom to make a leap into revolutionary action?[162]

First and foremost, television is and will always be a commercial enterprise. Like Bonnie Dow's *Prime-Time Feminism*, I see television entertainment as serving a similar function of interpreting social change and managing cultural beliefs.[163] At the center of the prime-time television enterprise has been the selling of the American dream. However, how are Black women placed within this dream? Until the late 1960s this dream popularly showed Black women as domestic workers (or maids) in docile and compliant roles such as those in the radio show and sitcom *Beulah* (1950-1952). While it is unhelpful to characterize these roles through the binary "positive" or "negative," in fact these roles broke barriers and allowed important access, these roles offered no fluidity in the visualization of Black women on television. James Baldwin

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[161] Combahee River Collective, "Black Feminist Statement," April 1977, p. 213.

[162] Ibid., 215.

[163] Dow, Bonnie, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, p. xv.

states that, "the country's image of the Negro…has never failed to reflect, with a kind of frightening accuracy, the state of mind of the country."[164] Albeit, a short quote from a much larger statement, this claim speaks volumes to not only the images offered to Black women, but also who is in control of such images and what are the results of this control if not combated.

Julia

It is crucial here to take a step back before *Sanford and Son* to analyze the modes in which Black women were displayed and performed. The first step in discussing such images is with Diahann Carroll's role as/in *Julia* (1968-1971, produced by Hancarr Productions and Savannah Productions) as it stands as the paramount image of Black women and/or femininity in this television temporal moment. 1960s television, *Julia* especially, is often frowned upon for retreating from the real-life conflicts taking place in the United States regarding civil unrest and struggles of Black life in general. Carroll herself addresses that her role in *Julia* was an "acceptable" image to break down barriers so that Black people could move on from there. "At the moment we are presenting the White Negro, and he has very little Negro-ness."[165] Just as Black women took on the roles of domestics in order to infiltrate the system, Carroll saw her role in *Julia*, as a necessary building block to Black women's possibilities of televisual humanity and fluidity of identification.

In Tandem's *Sanford and Son*, the junk-dealing widower Fred Sanford and his son Lamont are undoubtedly at the show's center. From the construction of their home, to their vary-

[164] Baldwin, James *Nobody Knows My Name*. Vintage, 1992. p.143.

[165] *Color Adjustment* Dir. Marlon Riggs, 1991.

ing discussions about the woes of life, the show is also poignantly Black male-centric and masculine. Reviewing the 1974 television season, the National Black Feminist Organization had this to say on the matter:

1. Black shows are slanted toward the ridiculous with no redeeming counter images;
2. Third World peoples are consistently cast in extremes;
3. When Blacks are cast as professional people, the characters they portray generally lack professionalism and give the impression that Black people are incapable and inferior in such positions;
4. When older persons are featured, Black people are usually cast as shiftless derelicts or non-productive individuals.[166]

With this review from an organization whose focus is on the Black feminine subject, it begs the question of what is the image or representation of Black women, or the Black feminine subject, in shows such as *Sanford and Son*? When analyzing the portrayal, role, and representation of Black women, *Sanford and Son* leaves the audience with mainly three reoccurring individuals and/or characters to discuss; Elizabeth Sanford, Donna Harris (played by Lynn Hamilton), and Aunt Esther (played by LaWanda Page).

"…But it would be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl": The Ephemeral and Ethereal Women of *Sanford and Son*

[166] Hunt, Darnell M. *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 270. National Black Feminist Organization, quoted in U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*, 1977.
The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was founded in 1973. The group worked to address the unique issues affecting black women in America. Founding members included Florynce Kennedy, Michele Wallace, Faith Ringgold, Doris Wright and Margaret Sloan-Hunter. One of two earliest organizations formed in the Black feminist movement, the National Black Feminist Organization clearly reflected the goals put forth in the Combahee River Collective Statement, which was being developed at around the same time by some of the same women. The 1973 Statement of Purpose for the NBFO declared the organization was formed, "to address ourselves to the particular and specific needs of the larger, but almost cast-aside half of the black race in America, the black woman." Wada, K. National Black Feminist Organization (1973-1976). Retrieved from https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/national-black-feminist-organization-1973-1976/.

Immediately, in episode one of season one ("Crossed Swords"), Fred adds a crucial dimension to the audience's knowledge of the Sanford family's make up when he exclaims that "one of these day's I'll be goin' to join your mother."[167] With the focus solely on these two men on screen, the dialogue tells the audience that the mother—and even any woman or feminity—are largely absent from the Sanford home. The audience becomes further invested in the show and its characters' background towards the end of the episode when, while looking to the sky with a solemn look on his face, Fred laments, in a phrase that would become an axiom of the series, "You hear that Elizabeth, I'm coming to join you honey!" What viewers will soon recognize as a reoccurring expression of exaggeration whenever Fred wants sympathy, is also a heartfelt plea to his beloved deceased wife Elizabeth, who he looks up to as his guardian angel in a sense. Although not physically present in the series, Elizabeth's spiritual presence is one that offers legitimacy to Fred's identity as a widower and his tough and at times guarded personality when it comes to compassion. Essentially, Elizabeth acts to redeem Fred's often crude and crass demeanor. As a foil to his usual personality traits, when Fred is speaking to Elizabeth he invites the audience to experience a more vulnerable side of his character that was possibly there when Elizabeth was alive. The fact that Fred's sensitivity or vulnerability is confined to these moments further reflects the common trait of masculinity restricting emotions, while femininity encourages them.[168]

In the case of the character of Elizabeth, Black women in this show are largely represented through absence and through Sanford's male voice. This reliance on the male voice to hear the female voice works to further an air of masculinity dominating the *Sanford and Son*

[167] *Sanford and Son* Season 1 Episode 1 "Crossed Swords" by: Aaron Ruben, 01/14/1972.

[168] hooks, bell. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. Routledge, 2004, pg. 113.

dialogue on screen and in the written script. Here, the Black women literally doesn't speak unless spoken to. And without the voice of the Black man, the Black women is never heard. This vulnerability that Elizabeth's spiritual presence pulls out of Fred at various times throughout the series is seen arguably in its strongest form when Fred pleads to Elizabeth about taking a new wife, Donna Harris (Lynn Hamilton). Here, we see the series' often troubling take on masculinity come to a standstill when Fred is brought to tears. This happens in "Donna Pops the Question," when Donna, tired of being Fred's longtime fiancée poses the question of marriage to Fred.[169] When Fred again balks at the thought of matrimony, Donna issues an ultimatum: either Fred marries her, or she'll accept the proposal of another man.

Troubled by Fred's response, Donna walks out of the scene to move on with her life. With nothing left but a "Goodbye, Dear" from Donna, the scene now shows Fred alone and distraught. One of the very few times in the series, Foxx as Fred conducts a monologue in the form of a conversation with to his dear Elizabeth.

Fred to himself: I'm gonna lose her…
[While beginning to cry, Fred then picks up a photo of him and Elizabeth and begins to speak to her.]
Fred: Remember this picture of us, Elizabeth? We sure had some good times Elizabeth. You used to say life is so short, go on and enjoy it. I know you meant you wanted us to enjoy it together, but all of a sudden, you were gone.

A somber piano melody begins to play as Fred continues to cry.

Fred: You did like one song and I used to sing it every time I looked at you…

[Displaying his showmanship, Foxx (as Fred), then breaks into a ballad of "Easy to Love" by Ella Fitzgerald.[170]]

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[169] *Sanford and Son* Season 5 Episode 8 "Donna Pops the Question" by: Saul Turteltaub and Bernie Orenstein, 11/14/1975.

[170] "Easy To Love" Written by: Cole Porter, Performed by: Ella Fitzgerald "…So worth the yearning for/So swell to keep every home fire burning for/We'd be so grand at the game/So carefree together/That it does seem a shame/That you can't see/Your future with me/'Cause you'd be oh, so easy to love…" Easy to Love lyrics, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.

Fred: I'm just lonesome Elizabeth, and I met this girl and I like her. And if I'm gonna to be happy, I'm gonna have to ask her to marry me. She won't be like taking your place, honey, she'd be more like taking your space. You don't mind do you, Elizabeth? Is it alright?

[Feeling Elizabeth's affirmative reply]

Fred: I thought you'd feel that way. (Fred holds up a glass) To you, Elizabeth, because you're so easy to love.

With his voice breaking throughout, we see a raw side of Fred rarely seen in the series. Fred's moments of vulnerability throughout the series are overwhelming encouraged through the presence of Black women. Even though this show is dominantly male-driven, the ephemeral and the ethereal women of the show often drive the actions of Fred, without him even noticing. Although the episode ends with Fred and Donna *not* getting married and Donna apologizing for her ultimatum, it is Donna who brings out Fred's (sometimes selfish) love and yearning for companionship is brought to the surface on screen with Donna. This moment of vulnerability is significant in that it acts as a counter to the show's overall hypermasculinity. The ability for the male characters to show instances of openness and vulnerability are mainly present through the language and performances of the Black women on screen.

Someone to Love

The character of Donna (who is a reoccurring character throughout the show's six seasons) is crucial to the show's depth as well as the complexity of the masculinity the show puts at its center. Donna, as Fred's long-term fiancée, is able to exist as a foil to Fred's character, one that often brings Fred away from his normal rugged and stubborn exterior to a kind and compassionate one, countering the show's often stereotypical masculine tone that steers away from heightened emotion. Having appeared early in the series ("The Barracuda" Season 1 Episode 10), Lynn Hamilton as Donna exhibits a level of poise and grace that strikingly contrasts

with the grit and roughness of Fred Sanford. With her introduction to the show the audience learns that, like Fred, Donna has lost a spouse, which pulls them closer towards companionship. Donna is a private homecare nurse, owns her own home, her own car, her own money, and is very much a "lady" in her delicate touch conservative practices of femininity. Fred continuously makes this clear stating, "Her name is Donna. You know that means 'Lady' right?" Even the term "lady" was often contentious in the empowerment of women. As Toni Morrison states, "the word 'lady' is anathema to feminists. They insist upon the 'woman' label as a declaration of their rejection of all the softness, helplessness and modesty, for they see them as characteristics which serve only to secure their bondage to men."[171] This softness and modesty in her character is reflected in Donna's drawn out bondage to Fred. Yes, Donna is independently successful Black women, yet in her love and dealings with Fred (like most of the characters) she is often dragged along in his shenanigans. In "The Barracuda," after multiple nights of Fred coming home late, Lamont confronts him and Fred admits to dating a woman and, much to Lamont's surprise, Fred has asked her to marry him.[172] An angry Lamont is expressively against the union because he feels as though he will be pushed out of the home and forgotten. More importantly, although Lamont's mother Elizabeth has been dead for over 20 years, he feels that no other women should ever share his "mother's bed." It's clear here that the early loss of his mother has somewhat suspended time for Lamont. He yearns for a maternal figure because of the lack of tenderness given from his father, however he hasn't let his mother go.

The episode becomes largely about the men's interactions with one another and how these men define their relationship surrounding Donna, rather than Donna having the agency to

[171] Morrison, Toni. *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, University of Mississippi Press, 2008, p. 19.

[172] *Sanford and Son* Season 1 Episode 10 "The Barracuda" by: Aaron Ruben, 03/17/1972.

develop her own identity. I believe that in these ways, Tandem often works to develop these episode narratives *around* the Black women rather than with them included as the focus. This points to a larger resistance to giving Black women the space and autonomy to control a scene or the narrative at Tandem.

Attempting to win Lamont's blessing and affection, Donna prepares dinner for the family in efforts to firmly place herself into her new role as mother, wife, and guardian of the hearth. Upon meeting Donna, Lamont treats her rudely and gives her the cold shoulder whilst consistently suggesting that she is intruding on his mother's space. This scene is so pivotal to the construction of the Black woman in Tandem sitcoms and on screen in general because it points to a broader pattern: the contention between the men against which a singular woman is forced to defend herself. The scene points directly to what is at the show's center—a space of Black masculinity that is consistently interrupted by the presence of Black women/femininity which must eventually (and literally) be pushed out of the space. When Lamont and Fred sit down to the dinner that Donna has prepared them, Lamont continues to pester about the food not being as good as his mother's. Fred, on the other hand raves about the dinner, joking that his deceased wife didn't know how to cook at all. These back and forth blows between Lamont and Fred, continue to drive much of the scenes dialogue, to a point that Donna has to stand between the two while they come face to face. Donna's interference in the argument leads to Fred driving her out of their home—leaving the space occupied solely by Fred and Lamont. Throughout the series, these contentions between Donna, Fred, and even Lamont, continue. There are no less than four episodes throughout the series focusing on Donna and Fred's failed attempts at having a wedding. The marginalization and failure to integrate the Black woman is evinced not only in the text of the show but by the fact that Lynn Hamilton's space and voice

was *only* on screen: she lacked production credits and was rarely if ever discussed or interviewed in trade journals and magazines about her character. As Donna struggled with Fred throughout the series yet remained loyal despite his constant indecisiveness and the length of their engagement, she personified the image of the Black woman as an emotional support system, even at the expense of herself.

An important point of the series occurs when two of the recurring Black women in *Sanford and Son* finally come face to face, Donna and Aunt Esther (played by LaWanda Page).[173] This point is important as it is a time in which Black women are in dialogue on *Sanford and Son*—one of the few moments in which the overly masculine is silenced. In "The Members of the Wedding," when Fred and Donna are to be married, Lamont plots to put their union asunder before their union by inviting his Aunt Esther and the rest of Fred's irascible in-laws to the wedding.[174] With Fred's in-laws stand in defense of his dead wife Elizabeth and continuously berate Donna throughout, because no one can take the place of their youngest sister. As the sisters push Donna into the kitchen for a private "girl's talk" there is a defense of Black familial-sisterhood from Fred's in-laws defending their dead sister, however there is also a crippling image of Black women's division as the three sisters scold Donna, while Donna only has Fred in her corner. When the three sisters take Donna into the kitchen for some "girl talk," Aunt Esther immediately confirms her status as the aggressor. Here, the writers of the show create a narrative of intra-racial division amongst the Black women in the show that lasts throughout the series. Despite the comedy that can be created from two consistently opposing characters, it is quite possible that the writers dwelt on the clashing of these two Black women to reify the

[173] The two are rumored to have been sisters in real life.

[174] *Sanford and Son* Season 3 Episode 9 "The Members of the Wedding" by: James R. Stein and Robert Illes, 11/09/1973.

show's focus on the Black masculine subject; if the two women had been written in such a way as to share a bond, it would call for more content surrounding the two and their growing relationship. This creation of passive and aggressive dichotomy works to create division amidst the Black women in the show. A division that is seen less frequently with the inclusion of Black writers later in the series who often focus on Black cohesion between Esther, Donna, and other characters on *Sanford and Son*. As Donna continues to be strung along by Fred and arguing with Esther throughout the series, Esther rises as a fan favorite, and a Black woman that cannot be forgotten in the history of Tandem Productions and *Sanford and Son*.

***"Watch it, Sucker!"*: The Radical Ambiguity of LaWanda Page**



Figure 2. LaWanda Page as "Aunt Esther."

In casting supporting characters on the show, Foxx recommended relatively unknown performers that he'd met in the days of segregated entertainment, such as the Chitlin' Circuit and in popular nightclubs throughout Black communities. One of these unknown performers was LaWanda Page. Following in the tradition of Redd Foxx and coming from blue comedy stand up, Page, like Foxx, worked to shift the style of sitcom humor.[175] The affluence and stardom that Foxx achieved never interfered with his decision to remember and hire his "black brothers and sisters."[176] In an interview with the *Sanford and Son* executive producer and writer, Saul Turteltaub, he revealed just how mindful of his community that Redd Foxx was.[177] Turteltaub stated that many of the extras that audiences see throughout the series were friends of Foxx. When it came to a day of shooting, Turteltaub reminisces that Foxx would say in his raspy voice, "Hey Turtle, can you put them somewhere in the episode?" With Tandem paying these Black bit players and extras $500 for a spot in an episode, Foxx worked to keep his community employed and used his star power in Tandem to bring these individuals up with him, of these individuals recommended the only woman was, in fact, LaWanda Page.

As an old friend of Foxx, LaWanda Page was introduced as a one-time extra and gained a recurring role that till this day is heralded in sitcom history as Fred's sister in law (sister of the late Elizabeth), Aunt Esther—the most prolific regular apart from Fred and Lamont.[178]

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[175] Blue comedy is humorous entertainment that ranges from bordering on indelicacy to gross indecency.

[176] Davidson, Bill. "The World's Funniest Dishwasher Is Still Cleaning Up: But for Redd Foxx, it has been a long trip from the kitchen to '*Sanford and Son*,'" in *TV* Guide, 03/17/1973, p.27.

[177] Turteltaub, Saul (Co-Executive Producer on *Sanford and Son*) interview with Adrien Sebro. May 30th, 2018.

[178] "The World's Funniest Dishwasher Is Still Cleaning Up: But for Redd Foxx, it has been a long trip from the kitchen to '*Sanford and Son*,'" p. 27

Once billed in the Black nightclub scene as the "Bronze Goddess of Fire,"[179] Page worked her way to be billed as "The Queen of Comedy" to Black audiences and "The Black Queen of Comedy," to the mainstream.[180] Bringing her raunchy stand up persona to the small screen (much like Foxx), Page premiered on January 5th, 1973 ("The Big Party") ironically playing Aunt Esther, a combative "holy-roller" and comedic enemy of Fred Sanford.[181] A "holy-roller" is a popular Black colloquial term, describing a character who often quotes scripture, public shaming towards acts of sin, and who engages in dancing, shaking or other boisterous movements in church because they perceive themselves as being under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

As part of Page's characterization of Esther, she shouts from scripture, often referencing the Holy Spirit in the sky by screaming "Oh, Glory!," and dressing conservatively with dresses to her ankles, stockings, and always holding a bible. "The Big Party" features for the first time Page as Esther, pleading to use Fred's home for bible study. Upon walking into the Sanford's home and seeing a dirty rent party, Aunt Esther and her crew of "holy raiders" beat everyone out of the home using their bibles. Page and Foxx's screen partnership added even more zeal to the once insipid scripts that Foxx struggled through, their chemistry was unmatched to anything on television at the time. As with general sitcom structure, the main protagonist barely changes from one episode to the next, Fred Sanford remains the stubborn and grumpy trickster who is the source of much of the shows comedic one-liners in monologues and dialogues with other

[179] A nightclub act which included Page eating fire and lighting cigarettes with her fingertips. This talent can be seen in *Sanford and Son* Season 5 Episode 15 "The Greatest Show in Watts."

[180] Littleton, Darryl J. and Littleton, Tuezdae. *Comediennes: Laugh Be a Lady*,"Whatchu Talkin' Bout?" Applause, 2012.

[181] *Sanford and Son* Season 2 Episode 15 "The Big Party" by: Odie Hawkins, January 5th, 1973.

characters. In every episode, the situation ends largely as it began; hence, if Fred feels distaste for another character, it continues in all subsequent episodes. With the introduction of Esther, the comic structure of the show shifts in season two, making Esther the dominant source of comedy in many of her exchanges with Fred, and the two forever have a relationship as enemies. With Fred often calling attention to her physical appearance and Esther responding to him with jabs about his age and his heathenism, the exchange between the two is always one that garners the most laughter from the studio audiences. In the first appearance of Esther on screen we see an example of this exchange that the two became known for in the future.

Esther: Down and out again huh Fred? You were a deadbeat the day my sister married you and you still a deadbeat today.
Fred: Listen Esther, you know good and well the day I married your sister, I was loaded.
Esther: Yeah, you was loaded alright. You was so drunk you fell on the preacher.
Fred: Well I had to get drunk to look at your ugly family.[182]

Through this exchange, Esther produces the initial comedic jab, thereby reversing the typical role that Fred takes as the show's star. Written by a Black writer (Odie Hawkins) this episode marks the first instance in the show in which a Black woman initiates the source of comedy. Through her dialogue Esther is given a level of power and voice here that complicated the traditional structure of *Sanford and Son*. Calling attention to Fred's shortcomings and defending herself against his comebacks marks a shift in narrative as there is now a character present that forces the masculinity of Fred to be at its defenses. While her relationship with Fred was usually confrontational, she portrayed a tender and motherly side when it came to her nephew Lamont, showing that her ability to speak up against an oppressive voice can be and is coupled by a maternal spirit, very seldom are Black women in television at this moment shown to have the ability to perform both roles.

[182] *Sanford and Son* Season 2 Episode 15 "The Big Party", January 5th, 1973.

Satisfied with this new direction, executive producer Aaron Ruben believed that, Redd had "opened up a whole new reservoir of rich talent to use…and that's what helps give the show its authentic flavor."[183] Although Page would become a hit on the show, the initial reaction to her from Tandem producers was unfavorable. Though she was offered the role after she auditioned, prior to taping, producers became concerned when Page, whose experience was limited primarily to nightclub stages, seemed to have difficulty working in a sitcom format and was unable to memorize her lines.[184] Eventually, one of the *Sanford and Son* producers told Foxx that Page would need to be fired and that another actor would need to be cast before the show could begin taping. Foxx responded by insisting that Page keep the part, even threatening to walk away from the show if Page were fired and by working with her on her lines telling her to simply "stop acting and start acting like yourself"—the producers eventually relented.[185] Yet another early example of the influence Foxx wielded at Tandem in support of a crucial character on the show.

Through *Sanford and Son,* although just two people, Tandem added a complexity to the images and representations of Black women *on screen* in the early 1970s. However, in terms of *off screen* or *behind the scenes* influences of Black women defining themselves and redefining the racial gender politics at play in the television industry as a whole, Tandem fell short with regards to *Sanford and Son*. A significant indicator of this failure is the lack of voice Black actresses of the show were able to muster in the writing of episodes and/or in interviews via trade

[183] Ibid.

[184] "The World's Funniest Dishwasher Is Still Cleaning Up: But for Redd Foxx, it has been a long trip from the kitchen to '*Sanford and Son*,'" p.27.

[185] Littleton, Darryl. *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us to Laugh*, Hal Leonard Corporation, 2008, p. 117.

and popular culture magazines. It seems in fact, that the most outspoken of the Black women on *Sanford and Son*, LaWanda Page, spoke her politics not on screen or in magazines but in the nightclub and blue comedy scene. Often viewers of Tandem sitcoms would write letters to discuss how much they enjoyed (or didn't) certain characters. While the letters written in reference to the character Fred Sanford were a mixture or positive and negative responses, viewer mail to Tandem that I gathered from the Norman Lear archive at Act III Productions, consistently pleaded for "More Aunt Esther," with comments like, "…the show wouldn't be a hit without her…her and Fred play off of one another perfectly…she's hysterical." With such appreciation, LaWanda Page was able to go off script from time to time and make the character her own, but she was not given her due in terms of the actual writing or production at Tandem.[186] Dedicated fan's truest vision of LaWanda Page off screen was through her stand-up comedy.

With all due deference to the Black stand up comediennes before Page (most importantly the mother of them all Moms Mabley), what Page was able to do with her successes of the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s is a feat to which very little scholarly attention has been given. Attention to this fact is important because Black women in the blue comedy scene were scarce, and those able to transition in and out of mainstream television should be analyzed for their ability to alter their comedic performance and often their politics on screen.[187] As a nightclub stand up, Page's persona and performance was much different than that of her role as

[186] Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box #S-274 "Correspondence-Sanford and Son," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*.

[187] Particularly, the two Black women who performed party records for Laff Records were only LaWanda Page and Tina Dixon.

Aunt Esther. Her stand up didn't allow for retakes, reviews of scripts, and practice, her performance was live and catered to playing off of (at the beginning of her career) an all-Black audience. While doing stand-up, Page wasn't bound to network politics, she unabashedly used curse words, and she actually wrote and spoke for herself. While on television, Page's Aunt Esther character was a combination of devout churchgoer and tough-as-nails realist, unafraid to state whatever was on her mind so long as it followed the Lord and the "good Book," an ironic commentary on her off screen acted persona. On the soundstage, Page was restricted to the words written for her, yet Foxx had much more autonomy in his role during. Although both acts are necessarily versions of a Black female performance, Aunt Esther and LaWanda Page are one body that works to show the complexity of Black female performance, one way that Tandem deemed acceptable and another that Page was given supreme agency. For the same Black woman to have a space to speak to a national audience preaching to Fred Sanford that his home is "reeking with sin—a den of iniquity," and to be able to also tell a nightclub audience that she's "as nervous as a whore in church" offers an important contrast to where certain performances, identities, and Black women's voices are restricted.

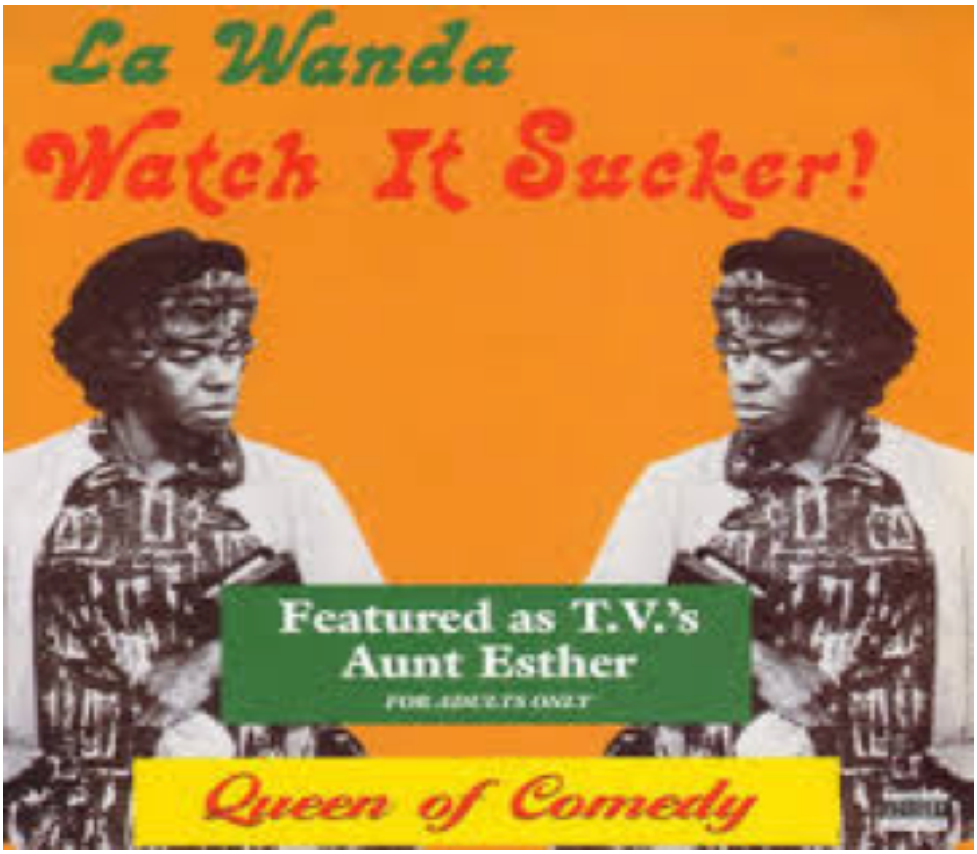


Figure 3. LaWanda, Queen of Comedy "Watch it Sucker!"

Before her fame as religiously conservative Aunt Esther, Page garnered notoriety and honed her fiesta approach as a member of the comedy group Skillet, Leroy, and Co.[188] Along with Ernest "Skillet" Mayhand and Wilbert "LeRoy" Daniel, Page performed stand up acts and made numerous ribald party records for the Los Angeles based Laff Records.[189] In 1972, through Laff Records, Page released her second and most acclaimed comedy album, *Watch It,*

[188] Watkins, Mel. "LaWanda Page, 81, The Aunt on TV's 'Sanford and Son'" in *The New York Times* (September 18th, 2002).

[189] Skillet and LeRoy would go on to also play characters of the same name as Fred Sanford's friends in the second and third *Sanford and Son*

Sucker![190] Being announced by the emcee as "The Queen of Comedy…LaWanda" this was the first album where a group of musicians accompanied her creating more of the "party album" atmosphere so important to this temporal moment. This album and her introduction as "Queen" prove that her space and place of most freedom as a Black woman artist was on the stand-up stage. Although she held her own on *Sanford and Son* as Aunt Esther when it came to bouts between her and Fred, it was ultimately Redd Foxx's show. Being identified as "The Queen of Comedy" was her honor alone, a space where she spoke her own politics, and was essentially free from script and network confines. Yet, given the name of the album it is clear that it went gold, largely on the strength of the comic's success on *Sanford and Son*. Although Page existed in stand up before the character of Aunt Esther, the fictional character allowed her exposure to a larger audience base, one that is equally entertained by bible-toting Esther *and* the no holds barred "Queen of Comedy." Strikingly different from fans of Foxx who were cited as "appalled" by Foxx's stand up performance. Specifically, Foxx fans in Trinidad that were expecting the much beloved Fred G. Sanford on stage, were not prepared for the comic's approach and the "blue material" of Redd Foxx.[191] With Page's album going gold, the success of her performance is clear, in fact, I believe it intrigued universal audiences because the fact that it blatantly displayed an uncommon performance by a Black woman and countered the femininity of Black women on screen. [192]

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[190] A phrase she became renowned for using on *Sanford and Son*

[191] Acham, Christine "Sanford and Son: Televising African American Humor" in *Spectator* Vol. 20 No. 2. Spring/Summer 2000.

[192] At the industry level, in 1958 the Recording Industry Association of America introduced its gold record award program for records of any kind, albums or singles, which achieved one million dollars in retail sales. For albums in 1968, this would mean shipping approximately 250,000 units; for singles the number would be higher due to their lower retail price. Venable, Shannon L. (2011). *Gold: A Cultural Encyclopedia*. ABC-CLIO.

The Black woman holy roller identity that Page personified on *Sanford and Son*, actually makes the otherwise "dangerous" blue comedy LaWanda "safe" for primetime White audiences. The ability of Page to take her image of raw, uncensored, indecent, and profane (yet still hilarious) to one that was mixture of religious, stern, conservative, yet still comedic, added depth to how audiences were able to view Black women in popular culture. I believe that her stand up performances challenged the status quo that Black women's performance was restricted to. In this performance of blue comedy, which often contains comedy that is off-color or risqué including profanity or sexual imagery that may shock and offend, Page used her Bible-toting image of Aunt Esther on television to her advantage by performing the complete opposite on stage—using the church as a site of raunchy antics and indecency. The album includes raunchy preacher skits about pastors masturbating and sex workers in the church. In her first track entitled "The Whores in Church," Page tells the story of sex workers or "whores" who could no longer find money on the streets so they decide to join the church.[193] In fact, Page identifies with these workers when she talks to the audience saying that her being on stage has her as "nervous as a whore in church." Clearly, her stand-up routine was a profane act by contrast with what is seen in the show, but it was also an in-joke for the Black audiences that brought to the show knowledge of her stand-up performance. Page's display and performance were common to long-time fans of her stand up work. However, those who knew her first as "Aunt Esther" were likely shocked to discover her earlier stand-up performances.

Although her characterization of Esther stayed relatively the same after the release of *Watch It, Sucker!*, Tandem's hiring of more Black writers brought more noticeable changes. This change in the show's production is quite possibly the cause to the show's highest viewed

[193] Page, LaWanda. *Watch It, Sucker!* Laff Records, 1972.

season (season three), as the sitcom more effectively reflected the language of the Black community via the jokes written, the comedic timing, the jargon, messages within each episode, and the vaudevillian style acting it encouraged.[194] Among these Black writers was the first ever Black associate story editor on network television, Ilunga Adell.[195] For Tandem, Adell was the answer to critics who suggested the popular series could hardly be an authentic portrayal of Black life since it was produced and mostly written by Whites. Adell played a large part in the range of the show's moral lessons and character depth including Aunt Esther's character development, language, and screen presence. Being the sole writer of eight of the twenty four scripts in season three, including the "best show of the season 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,'" Adell claimed in interviews concurrent with the show's run that he had an influence on the series and its direction.[196] This particular episode "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" featured Page in one of her most important performances on *Sanford and Son*, both comedic and passionate.[197] In this episode, Fred's feathers get ruffled when an old friend named "Big Money Grip" from St. Louis comes to town claiming to be Lamont's real father stating that he and Elizabeth had an affair during his weekend pass in the Army.

The phrase itself "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" is used as a title drop from Fred's friend Grady in the episode. The phrase is a term colloquially familiar to the Black community. Prior to the days of DNA testing, it was basically impossible to verify a child's paternity. The

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[194] Brooks, Tim; Marsh, Earle (2007). *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present (Ninth Edition)*. Ballantine Books, p. 1687.

[195] "Sanford's Comedy Black Writer's Work" in *Sarasota Herald-Tribune TV-Work*, July 7th-13th, 1974. p. 11

[196] Ibid.

[197] *Sanford and Son* Season 3 Episode 14 "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" by: Ilunga Adell, 01/04/1974.

only evidence besides the word of the mother was the child's physical attributes. In Hortense Spiller's article of the same name, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," she describes Black women as "marked" by this country and individuals whose existence describes a locus confounded identities.[198] Black women have largely been the victims of these markings by their position in the system of patriarchy and race. They have largely been unable to define themselves and speak for themselves, and in this case of Black motherhood specifically, the paternity of their children and even presence of a father is called is often the given much more attention or importance. Spillers comments that, "in certain human societies, a child's identity is determined through the one of the Mother, but the United States, from at least one author's point of view, is not one of them."[199] She dissects Daniel Moynihan's "Report," to show that it's clear that the popular understanding of the Black community fairs differently than other human societies.

> In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so far out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well…Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs…A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.[200]

According to this celebrated report, the "Negro Family" has no Father to speak of—"his Name, his Law, his Symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential life of the Black community, the "Report" maintains, and it is surprisingly, the fault of the

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[198] Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The "American Connection (Summer 1987) p.65.

[199] Ibid.

[200] Moynihan, Daniel P. "The Moynihan Report (Negro Family: The Case for National Action). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965.

Daughter, or the female line."[201] In the evidently masculine *Sanford and Son* the supposition that the Black family has no Father to speak of is challenged. However, this challenge comes at the expense of the mother, who must be absent. This suggests that in Black families, either the mother or father will be absent. There is an inability to be nuclear and Black. Further, although Elizabeth has passed away many years prior, Sanford levels against her accusations of an affair. Thus the female, matriarch, and the maternal line is left defenseless and faulted by the show's men. Throughout the episode as the men argue over Lamont's paternity, Fred succumbs to his fears and doubts. As a man who has played sole parent to Lamont for so long, he becomes fearful of losing him. Looking at baby pictures of Lamont while Fred's friend Grady comments, "Wow he looks just like you, Grip!," and seeing the present resemblance of Lamont and Grip (both darker skinned with full heads of hair, while Fred is lighter skinned and balding) Fred slowly loses faith that Lamont is in fact his son. Leading him to question Elizabeth, his beloved wife, whose name and body are now sites of attack, yelling to the sky questioning her character and her virtue. Regarding these bodily attacks, Spillers states, "…the African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically externalized acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of male brutality and torture inflicted by other males."[202] Although the brutality of this quote isn't visually seen on screen, the various men in this episode, through discussion, actively target, violate, and in some ways torture not only Elizabeth's character but also the performative acts of her body and sexual perversions. Even in

[201] Spillers, 66.

[202] Spillers, 68.

her death, her bodily actions are up to scrutiny by men, and she has no opportunity to defend herself.

Questioning the virtue and fidelity of his dead wife, Fred calls upon his often nemesis, Aunt Esther, in his search for the truth amidst these allegations that Lamont might not be his son. The only woman (physically present) in the episode, Esther is the only person to defend the woman on trial.[203] Once questioned by Fred, Esther takes extreme offense to the claim and is ready to battle in her sister's honor.

Esther: Fred Sanford, you gotta be ashamed to even let something like that come out of your heathenous mouth. My baby sister was as pure as the driven snow!

Fred: Yeah, but who was doing the driving? (*crowd roars in laughter*)

Esther: Elizabeth was faithful to you, until the day she died! Only someone with a foul mouth and a foul mind could come up with such a foul idea! Fred Sanford you're foul!

This moment of exchange between the two marks Esther as the sole line of defense of not only her sister but to the virtue of Black womanhood. With Fred trying to lighten the situation with jokes, Esther responds assertively and confidently, talking down to Fred and the claims he is making. Casting shame over Fred for making such claims against his own wife, Esther takes control of the scene and changes the narrative of the men shaming Elizabeth. Only after Esther's rant is Fred's faith restored in his deceased wife's fidelity. When Grip enters the room he remembers Esther from their adolescence so they begin to talk and reminisce until Fred tells him to tell Esther of the claim he is making. As Grip confidently states "Lamont Sanford is my son," Esther comes out of her holy-roller persona and into her stand up identity of LaWanda Page, stands to strike and yells, "What did you say, Nigga?!" The only time in the series where

[203] Of course, there may be some bias here because it is her younger sister.

Esther has such an intense reaction and uses the n-word, the live off-screen audience is in an uproar of claps and laughter as Esther asks Fred to join her in "beating the Hell out of him."

With Grip still believing that Lamont is his son, he confronts Lamont and tells him to make a choice. In a heartfelt moment Lamont declares to Fred that he's the only father that he ever knew and that's how it's forever going to be. This short moment of emotion (which caused tears from Fred and Esther) is quickly taken back to comedy when Lamont says, "Now, Grip if you are my father that was between you and my mother, I ain't got nothing to do with that!" In the conclusion of the episode, Aunt Esther's morally upright image is deflated when it is revealed that in her youth, Grip had snuck into her room and had sex with her, mistaking her for Elizabeth in the dark. A grossly embarrassed Esther storms off scene praying, "He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone!" Evident here, the show gives an instant glimpse of another persona—an intertextual alternative persona for Esther/Page.

Other than the context mentioned, this episode works to show not only the powerful force of Esther's presence in the show, but also the necessity of her character in defense of Black women, physically and spiritually. Esther puts her body on the line in defense of her sister whilst her own bodily actions end up being called to question. Rather than be subjected to the questioning of the men, Esther uses this as a moment of agency as she prays about it and leaves with her head held high and her only judgment coming from her savior. Although the racial gender politics at play at Tandem Productions didn't reflect Black women having their say behind the scenes, the introduction of Black writers writing about their own culture, but more importantly the embodiment of Elizabeth's spirit, Lynn Hamilton as Donna, and "The Queen of Comedy" LaWanda Page as Aunt Esther on screen, left a promising future for the ways in which racial gender politics at Tandem would alter in their future Black sitcoms. Page's work

on *Sanford and Son* lasted past the show's tenure as she was able to revive her role as Aunt Esther in the show's spinoff *The Sanford Arms* (September 16th-October 14th, 1977) as its main character. Although the show was short-lived, it marks an instance in which Black women were given their due, as the result of sacrifices other Black actors had to endure.

Part 3: *Given Their Due:* Dissent and Protests on *Sanford and Son*

In a moment so heavily influenced by electoral politics, community building, activism, and self-determination, it is important to address how dissent and protest surfaced through television and to focus on the specific political and social issues on/off screen of *Sanford and Son*. Tandem often utilized *Sanford and Son* episodes to focus on many popular Black issues, ranging from to housing policy to critiques of local political elections. These episodes emphasize community and local issues as significant to urban Black communities. While critiques of politics and society existed as forms of protests on screen, Black artist's dissent against White executives took place through *Sanford and Son's* Redd Foxx public opposition with Tandem and challenging of NBC at large. In this period directly after the Civil Rights movement, the nation was fraught with struggles for equal citizenship and citizens seeking the right to the pursuit of happiness as promised by the Constitution. The Civil Rights Movement, and the collective actions after it, were important forms of political action and expression for Black people in America (specifically in this case) that I refer to as protests. These protests are forms of political expression that seek to bring about social or political change by influencing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the public or the policies of an organization or institution. As stated by sociologists Davita Silfen Glasberg and Deric Shannon, these protests or movements are "organizational structures and strategies that may empower oppressed populations to mount effec-

tive challenges and resist the more powerful and advantaged elites."[204] These sometimes informal groupings of individuals that focused on ways to undo specific social issues often incited tension. Whether through critiquing local politics onscreen or actors expressing their discontent off screen, *Sanford and Son* was often a site of controversial dialogue and resistance. Redd Foxx often worked to resist the executives in efforts to take agency over and redeem the Black image on television. Facing direct controversy with Tandem executives and NBC, Redd Foxx risks his star role to the fight for Black people's rights of self-expression through acting and writing, and for his own advancement and enrichment. My discussion of the politics of dissent among actors on *Sanford and Son* largely comes from the only currently-known, extant record of this pushback—the discourse about the behind the scenes conflicts in *TV Guide*. The *TV Guide* is not an archival source and it is not likely to reflect an unvarnished, completely accurate account of the events surrounding the show. Indeed, creative professionals often deliberately embellish accounts of backstage happenings in interviews. However, *TV Guide* is an excellent source in other respects. It demonstrates how actors used their voices off screen and in conversations with the press to shift their on-screen personae and to create room for more complex images.

"…Niggas don't say that!"

The news that *Sanford and Son* had risen to the number two spot in the Nielsen ratings following the show's second season drew Foxx to a face to face with then showrunner and Executive Producer Aaron Ruben the following day. "Aaron", Foxx said, "we got so high up there in the ratings because you finally cuttin' them Caucasian lines outta the scripts. Can't blame

[204] Glasberg, Davita Silfen and Shannon, Deric. *Political Sociology: Oppression, Resistance, and the State*, Pine Forge Press, 2011, p. 150.

you though, after all you only been a nigger for six months."[205] Here, it is evident that Foxx felt that merely revising scripts from *Steptoe and Son* (*Sanford and Son's* British predecessor), as Ruben did for the entire first season, was holding the show's realism back. Writer Eugenia Collier supports this claim when she states, "to begin with, the show is not based upon Black realities but upon a British TV series, *Steptoe and Son*. Now, you simply cannot substitute Black characters for White, sprinkle around a little Black English, and think you have a Black show. For in spite of Redd Foxx's jokes and Demond Wilson's Black beauty, *Sanford and Son* remains White to the core."[206] In an interview with former show runner and co-executive producer of *Sanford and Son*, Saul Turteltaub, he explained to me some of the struggles he was forced to contend with upon taking this position after Aaron Ruben was fired. He recalls with great clarity, a conversation that he had with *Sanford and Son* co-stars, actors Redd Foxx and Demond Wilson, while at a table read for an upcoming episode:

Foxx to Turteltaub: "Hey Turtle, what's this line right here? Niggas wouldn't say that!"
Wilson to Foxx: "I would say this."
Foxx: "Well, you not a real Nigga."[207]

This dispute with the script writing was one that was frequent with not only the actors, but with much of the audience of the show also. With only White writers in the early seasons of the show, there was lack of Blackness in the show's themes and language used that wasn't representative to the very political temporal moment. Tandem addressed these concerns with the

[205] Davidson, Bill. "The World's Funniest Dishwasher Is Still Cleaning Up: But for Redd Foxx, it has been a long trip from the kitchen to '*Sanford and Son.*'" *TV Guide.* New York, March 17th, 1973. Microfilm.

[206] Collier, Eugenia. "*Sanford and Son* is White to the Core" in *The New York Times*. June, 17th, 1973.

[207] Turteltaub, Saul (Co-Executive Producer on *Sanford and Son*) interview with Adrien Sebro. May 30th, 2018.

hiring of many Black male writers such as, comedians Paul Mooney and Richard Pryor, and former theater writer Ilunga Adell (sometimes credited as Adell Stevenson) to name a few. As Christine Acham noted, with the hiring of Black writers, "the language of the scripts began to reflect a contemporary understanding of urban Black America. There were everyday references to the concerns of living in inner-city communities, such as problems with the police, lack of job opportunities, and racism."[208] These new hires led to episodes strikingly different in tone and language when Black writers were credited. These episodes served as subtle, and often blatant, examples of the writers using their newfound agency to write narratives of protest. Whether through Ilunga Adell's "Lamont Goes African," where Lamont educates himself in Afrocentric thought, garb, and even casting away of his "slave name," or through Paul Mooney's "Fred Sanford, Legal Eagle," where Fred and other Black community members must contend with the judicial system, the introduction of more Black writers helped to imagine new Black television possibility.[209] This new way in which Black writers used *Sanford and Son* to address the temporal social and political climate kept the ratings high and was soon seen through multiple episodes, written by Black and White writers alike. Episodes like "Fred the Activist," show this protest clearly. Angered by the age discrimination policy of a local stereo dealer, Fred rallies a troop of "Gray Foxes" and leads the charge to change the policy.[210] With a clear nod to the revolutionary practices of the Black Panther Party, this put front and center the

[208] Acham, 103.

[209] *Sanford and Son* "Lamont Goes African" Season 2 Episode 17 (Jan. 19th, 1973)
Sanford and Son "Fred Sanford, Legal Eagle" Season 3 Episode 15 (Jan, 11th, 1974)

[210] *Sanford and Son* "Fred the Activist" Season 6 Episode 20. Although outside the scope of Tandem Productions' partnership of Yorkin and Lear, this episode is relevant to numerous forms of activism seen on screen.

activist fights against ageism in business, effectively putting large scale social issues on screen via sitcom.

"Strange Bedfellows"

There is a popular saying that "politics makes strange bedfellows," meaning that politicians often form peculiar associations so as to win more votes. Amidst nationwide political strife and scandal, where there are countless strange bedfellows, it was often difficult for the Black poor to trust politicians and their motives. These political fears helped align this moment in the 1970s to be associated with the rise of Black electoral politics and the transition from the Black power era to more institutionalized and symbolic forms of Black leadership and movements.[211] The writers at Tandem used *Sanford and Son* as a form of protest in order to critique Black electoral politics, seen evidently in the episode "Strange Bedfellows."[212]

Pressured by a woman he is attempting to impress, Lamont calls into a local radio program to confront a caller who is complaining about the presence of a new building in their neighborhood. His impassioned speech is worth quoting at length as it speaks to the real-life struggles of poor working-class communities of color.

Lamont to radio spokesman: Yeah, that building may be an eye sore and difficult to look at but, it takes millions of people off unemployment and welfare, and gives them steady jobs. I would do all that I could to encourage more trade in the area, to make jobs available for people who want to work and give them steady employment and pride and dignity so that they can hold their heads up high. It's one thing to have trouble breathing and it's another thing to have trouble eating!

[211] Reed, Jr., Adolph. *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 9.

[212] *Sanford and Son* "Strange Bedfellows" Season 4 Episode 17

Although motivated by sexual prowess, Lamont's words nevertheless spoke truth to power. Praise for Lamont's impassioned call brings a district committee chairman to the Sanford home the next day, pleading for Lamont to run for State Assemblyman. With a radio public opinion to Lamont's call at 90 percent positive, the committee chairman feels that Lamont is the perfect candidate to run for the political office. Despite initial hesitation, Lamont soon agrees to take the call to action.

Lamont: Assemblyman?! I ain't even graduate high school."
Committee Chairman: Doesn't matter, you're down to earth, young—a breath of fresh air.
Lamont: I'm just not qualified.
Fred: Qualified?! The man is talking about politics, not brain surgery.
(*knock at the door*). Come on in! Welcome to the Black Caucus!

Fred is clearly poking fun at the contemporary political climate, particularly, the move towards electoral politics from movement politics. Fred asserts here that politics isn't a matter of educational qualification but rather the strength of a campaign. The district committee chairman's words of the community needing someone relatable, working class, and "a breath of fresh air," a larger need of communities of color in this moment yearning for political figures that represent their same identity. In the concluding scene of the episode, Lamont is in debate with another candidate (a Black woman) on the housing crises effecting the Watts community. Although Fred ultimately ruins his campaign by disrupting a televised debate to plead for his son not to run for office, Lamont withdraws his candidacy on the grounds of his opponent being more abreast to the problems of the community.

Although Demond Wilson portrays Lamont as an agent for social and political change in this episode, off screen Wilson chose to distance himself from conflict and change. Saul Tur-

teltaub even commented that, "no one on set really got along with Demond other than in a business sense—which is all her cared for."[213] In a one-on-one interview with Wilson, a writer for *TV Guide* determined that Wilson is a great guy, works well with others and keeps his "nose clean" of situations he is not a part of.[214] Wilson sees his involvement with *Sanford and Son* as first and foremost a business and should be treated as such. In Wilson's view it isn't his role as a professional to take sides in such matters like petty disputes. "I don't take any action in terms of rebelling until the right moment. Like when it's time to renegotiate contracts."[215] The show's star however, Redd Foxx, puts his own career at stake to battle the executives at Tandem and NBC head on.

"Trouble in Paradise"

Towards the end of third season, *Sanford and Son* was still enjoying its success, maintaining the number three spot in the Nielsen ratings between 1973 and 1974.[216] When it came time to reevaluate contract specifics, bad relations drew Foxx to walk out on the show mid-season in protest. Written immediately after the third season, Bill Davidson's "Trouble in Paradise," was the *TV Guide's* feature article that focused specifically on the issues that Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin faced with the stars of their three major Tandem shows—Foxx of *Sanford and Son*, Carroll O'Connor of *All in the Family*, and Bill Macy of *Maude*, which explains the

[213] Turteltaub, Saul (Co-Executive Producer on *Sanford and Son*) interview with Adrien Sebro. May 30th, 2018.

[214] Young, J.R. "Include Him Out," in *TV Guide,* October 5th, 1974, p. 22

[215] Ibid.

[216] Brooks, Tim; Marsh, Earle (2007). *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present (Ninth Edition)*. Ballantine Books, p. 1687.

guide's cover art featuring caricatures of the stars defacing a portrait of Norman Lear into the devil.[217] The article paints Lear as a tyrant over Tandem and hints at the possible end to his 35-year partnership with Yorkin. As the chief executive producer over *Sanford and Son*, Yorkin was asked to comment on Foxx and the recent debacle around him leaving the show. Of course, I am not taking this source at face value because the quote is coming from someone who firmly held the reigns in all contract negotiations: Foxx's boss. Yorkin states that, "Redd Foxx's people came in and said Redd couldn't work in our NBC rehearsal hall anymore. It has no windows and Redd, they said, is claustrophobic. I said, that's ridiculous, none of the NBC rehearsal halls have windows."[218] After negotiating with Foxx and his agents, Tandem offered him a hotel with floor to ceiling windows to look through, and after a week there Foxx could no longer stand all the people looking at him through the windows so he conceded back to the windowless halls of NBC.[219]

Leaving the series for these seemingly petty reasons, the show was forced to find a way to end the third season, having six episodes left. From Season 3 Episode 19 ("Lamont Goes Karate") to the finale (Episode 24 "Hello Cousin Emma, Goodbye Cousin Emma"), Whitman Mayo, a recurring cast member as Fred Sanford's best friend Grady, took Foxx's place and moved into the junkyard with Lamont. Whitman Mayo showed tremendous grace under this pressure. When asked about this predicament, Mayo stated that, "Nobody could ever replace

[217] Davidson, Bill. "Trouble in Paradise." *TV Guide*. New York, April 6th, 1974. Microfilm.

[218] Ibid., 5.

[219] Ibid.

Redd…but I'm doing this best I can under the circumstances."[220] Putting this article in conversation with the actual show, writers were frantically revising scripts, writing Foxx out of the action on the pretense that Fred Sanford had gone to St. Louis for a relative's funeral.

Various newspaper articles and archival materials reveal that Foxx's pretense in walking out of the show in disagreement was much deeper than a rehearsal hall change. Foxx's walk out from his hit show was initially attributed to various health concerns. According to a writer of the *Chicago Tribune*, Foxx's complaints of being too ill to work were a lie. In fact, one journalist suggested, although he was drawing around $25,000 per episode of *Sanford and Son*, Foxx frankly admitted that he wanted $1 more than any NBC star has ever been paid.[221] With Foxx at the helm of the most profitable NBC show of this period and the second most of Tandem Productions (the first being *All in the Family* on CBS), his ask for a salary that reflects this is not farfetched, however, Bud Yorkin received many letters from viewers that felt otherwise. In fact, in Tandem Productions' interoffice correspondence, Yorkin even comments, "mail is running in favor of us forgetting about Foxx 8 to 1," in essence ignoring Foxx's demands and writing him out of *Sanford and Son* completely.[222] These conflicting accounts seem to draw a conclusion that although Foxx's walkout was initially under false pretenses, once his true goals were made public, Yorkin and Tandem attempted to save face by writing *Sanford and Son* successfully without Foxx's presence.

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[220] Robinson, Louie. "Redd Foxx—Crazy like a fox, 'Sanford and Son' star seeks a piece of the action." *Ebony Magazine.* June 1974, p. 158.

[221] Debb, Gary, "Redd admits trying to outfox NBC" in *The Chicago Tribune,* 1974.

[222] Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box #S-274 "Correspondence-Sanford and Son," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions.*

Fan mail sent to Tandem after Foxx's strike, was marked by Tandem office assistants as "Pro-Grady" (the character portrayed by Whitman Mayo) and "Pro-Redd Foxx" given the content of the letter against or in support of Foxx's strike.[223] The letters listed "Pro-Grady," speak largely to the success of Whitman Mayo and his newfound stardom as the shows lead in Foxx's absence. These letters make comments such as: "Sanford and Son is better than ever with Mayo," "Foxx is too raunchy, Foxx is a dirty old man," "we plan to boycott the show if Foxx returns," and that Mayo's humor is much cleaner and more acceptable. A writer even scolded, "Foxx is holding Yorkin up for an "egotistical salary increase. I'm really boiled to think that this foul-mouthed egotistical jerk may ever be seen on TV again!"[224] These letters that are "Pro-Grady," are in fact Anti-Foxx in their writing, tone, and content. Each letter "Pro-Grady" seems to mention Grady's safeness, how tame he is, his calmness, and his overall less aggressive humor, in essence he is a more manageable Black man and actor. One specific letter from a disgruntled viewer, addressed to Norman Lear, suggests that Lear has too many Black people in his programs. This letter deserves to be quoted at length here:

> Redd Foxx you took from out of the gutter with his foul mouth, what does he do like all of them, thinks he deserves more money, he never had it so good as now. Don't give in to him, he is not that good, you always can find a new one. Please no more Blacks, the more you do for them, the more they want.[225]

Although this letter is on the extreme in its racism compared to the more subtle approach of the other letter-writers, it points to a larger group of viewers that make up real life

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[223] Ibid.

[224] Letter received and time stamped on March 15th, 1974. Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box #S-274 "Correspondence-Sanford and Son," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions.*

[225] Letter received and time stamped on March 15th, 1974. Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box #S-274 "Correspondence-Sanford and Son," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions.*

perspectives on a Black actor fighting for what they deserve. The letters repeatedly attack Foxx's character and identity outside of the show but seem to leave the matter of his impact on television at large, Black television specifically, and his demonstrated reasons for his salary increase ignored. This letter further highlights the need of Black people to serve in production as well as acting roles in this age of television in order to debunk the idea that the White executives are doing favors for their Black artists and that the Black artists must silently abide by whatever conditions they are dealt. The Black actors and writers work to visualize a Black authenticity on screen, yet they are scarcely given their due.

Foxx himself, in an interview on the *Mike Douglas Show*, later denied the reports of illnesses as well as walking out for monetary gain.[226] Foxx's disappearance from his TV series, he claimed, was a protest on behalf of all Black entertainers.[227] Although his needs for a less physically demanding distance from his dressing room to rehearsal facilities are true, Foxx admitted that money was not the issue in his walkout, but instead the dignity of Blacks in the series. In his protest, Foxx's list of demands included more control over the *Sanford and Son* scripts. Foxx comments in the interview that although he occasionally changes dialogue, puts things into the show and takes things out, he wants more to say in future shows if he is to return to the series in its fourth season. He admits above all that, "(*Sanford and Son*) could not honestly be reflective of Black community life because everything takes place in a junkyard," and his greater role in the writing and development process can work to be more reflective to the reality of Black life he seeks to see.[228]

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[226] Gardella, Kay "If NBC Keeps Promises, I'll Be Back, Says Foxx" in *New York Daily News*, Friday March 15th, 1974, p. 272.

[227] Ibid.

[228] Ibid.

Upon the knowledge of Foxx's true intentions in his strike against NBC and Tandem, many letters received were labeled "Pro-Redd Foxx." These letters supported Foxx in asking for more money, mentioned Black mistreatment at every level in America, demanded that Foxx deserved more respect, and even lamented that *Sanford and Son* is failing because it has lost its backbone—Redd Foxx.[229] The majority of these letters of support seem, given the diction and message, to be from members of the Black community standing in solidarity with Foxx. One particular fan "Pro-Redd Foxx" exclaims in her letter that Redd has loads of support in his corner and that "he is too much of a man to allow such a caricature of his Blackness and his manhood to stream all over this country!! Do your thing, Redd!! Try to get yourself together NBC!"[230] Although such blatant professions of support were few and far between, it is important to see here that members of the Black community can identify Foxx's distaste in the show's direction and respect him for what he risks and they join him in calling not only Tandem to task, but also to the larger corporation of NBC. Redd Foxx's true mission of his strike inspired collective activism among his fans and supporters. In a letter addressed to Bud Yorkin, a community organization called the "Friends of Fred Sanford," expressed that they were actively campaigning for the return of Redd Foxx to *Sanford and Son* and were contacting the show's national sponsors in order to get the network's attention. To quote further:

> "…the producer and writers used White perspectives to write a Black show …Lamont and Grady, are doing irreparable damage to the strong Black character of Redd Foxx (Fred Sanford) in the past as well as demonstrating "Uncle Tom" behavior in that they have chosen to continue

[229] Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box #S-274 "Correspondence-Sanford and Son," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions.*

[230] Letter received and time stamped on March 28th, 1974. Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box #S-274 "Correspondence-Sanford and Son," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*

> to perform instead of supporting Mr. Foxx and halting all filming until a satisfactory arrange ment was reached."[231]

At the end of the letter, the "Friends of Fred Sanford," solicited support from other Black media individuals and groups such as, Tony Brown of *Black Journal*, Black Efforts for Soul in T.V. (BEST), Black newspapers, and magazines, asking them to also send letters in support of Foxx.[232] Although initiated for many reasons, Foxx's strike against NBC and Tandem was above all to take a stand and advocate for his voice to be heard not only on screen as Fred Sanford, but as Redd Foxx behind the scenes, in order to bring relevancy, authenticity, and a more vast depiction of Black life to television's imagination. Black viewers were seeing for the first time in their lifetime an all-Black sitcom and they were using their voices to protest its limits through voicing support for its star. Albeit, met with strife and backlash, Foxx's actions inspired a movement of Black actors standing up for themselves and the agency they have earned through their stardom.

Through the strife with Tandem and NBC, Foxx sought a 25% ownership stake in the series, and Tandem Productions fought back with a $10 million lawsuit. The dispute was resolved in June of 1974, with Foxx receiving $25,000 per-episode, plus 25% of the producers' net profits.[233] Upon the start of the fourth season, Foxx came back to *Sanford and Son* bringing the show from a number 3 position in the Nielsen ratings to a number 2 in the 1974-75 year.[234]

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[231] Letter received and time stamped on April 5th, 1974. Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box #S-274 "Correspondence-Sanford and Son," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*

[232] Ibid.

[233] Turteltaub, Saul (Co-Executive Producer on *Sanford and Son*) interview with Adrien Sebro. May 30th, 2018.

[234] Brooks, Tim; Marsh, Earle (2007). *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present (Ninth Edition)*. Ballantine Books, p. 1687.

Foxx's strike also led to the firing of previous executive producer and show runner Aaron Ruben and the promotion of Saul Turteltaub and Bernie Orenstein as the co-executive producers and show runners. Turteltaub and Orenstein understood that there was no show without Redd and that his presence was integral to its success and worked to always support him in whatever gripes he had moving forward.[235] The strike also led to Foxx's future credits as story consultant on the show as well as the credited writer for two episodes, "The Masquerade Party" and "Sergeant Gork."[236]

Equally important, Foxx's dissent had effects on his co-stars. Demond Wilson acknowledged that its "Redd's show" and as his partner on the show, he supports the decisions that drew Redd to step away.[237] Wilson sees tremendous value in the show that without Redd, wouldn't be what it is. He sees *Sanford and Son* as a real image of Blacks, countering images seen in things such as blaxploitation films. Films that he believes "glamorize crime to Black and Chicano kids who are stuck without any real future, glamorized crime is their way out."[238] Wilson saw the value in Foxx's protest, but at arm's length.

Also, through Foxx's strike, Whitman Mayo became a star in his own right. Having to step in the star role won Mayo national attention, leading to NBC producing a spinoff of *Sanford and Son*, *Grady* (1975-1976). Through a *JET Magazine* interview with Mayo regarding his

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[235] Turteltaub, Saul (Co-Executive Producer on *Sanford and Son*) interview with Adrien Sebro. May 30th, 2018.

[236] *Sanford and Son* Season 4 Episode 18 "The Masquerade Party" January 31, 1975.

Sanford and Son Season 5 Episode 23 "Sergeant Gork" March 12th, 1976.

[237] Young, J.R. "Include Him Out," in *TV Guide,* October 5th, 1974, p. 24

[238] Ibid., 26.

new series, it's clear that although Mayo stepped into the starring role upon Foxx's strike, there was no bad blood between them and that the two remain friends and support one another. "One of the biggest fans of the new show is Redd Foxx, who not only shares screen credit as its creator but owns a reported 25 percent of the series."[239] With fan letters that were "Pro-Grady" and "Pro-Redd Foxx," audiences inherently pinned the two Black men against one another, when in reality, the fight was between the forces of actor and executive—Black and White. Through these actions of unrest at the site of *Sanford and Son*, Foxx put his career on the line and was able to negotiate a salary and working space equitable to his contributions at Tandem. Lear and Yorkin's freshman entry into the Black sitcom category faced many challenges and successes throughout its run. Sanford and Son put front and center the economic disadvantages of Black communities in America through the hiring of Black writers and the show also witnessed the slow entry of Black women comedians to the mainstream. All of these transformative acts in the television industry were buttressed by Redd Foxx and the agency he used to advocate for change. His actions not only drew national attention to Black actors sacrificing themselves for the larger struggle of identification in television, but also begat other avenues of Black performance and activism at the Tandem factory of television production.

[239] Lucas, Bob, "Grady Bids for TV Stardom on His Own Show" in *JET Magazine*, 12/25/1975, p. 58.

Chapter Three: *Good Times*

Part 1: *"Keeping Your Head Above Water"*

Good Times Cast member voice over: "Live from Television City in Hollywood!"

Good Times
Any time you meet a payment
Good Times
Any time you need a friend
Good Times
Any time you're out from under
Not getting hassled, not getting hustled
Keepin' your head above water
Making a way when you can
Temporary layoffs
Good Times
Easy credit rip-offs
Good Times
Scratchin' and surviving
Good Times
Hanging in and jiving
Good Times
Ain't we lucky we got 'em
Good Times[240]

In this chapter, I will discuss television's first Black "nuclear family" which appeared in *Good Times* (1974-1979). I address the show's often comically dysfunctional modes of resilience of Black working-class life on screen, as well as the ways in which the Black actors and writers used their agency and practiced resilience in order to contribute to this show's focus off screen. The chapter is broken down into three parts that focus on space and place, Esther Rolle as an agent of change, and John Amos' activism. Differing from its Tandem Productions predecessor, *Sanford and Son*, which lacked theme song lyrics, the beginning of each *Good Times* episode rehearsed for viewers the plights covered in episode plotlines. Each line in the upbeat theme song describes the intricacies of working class public housing or "project" life that many

[240] "Good Times" Performed by Jim Gilstrap and Blinky Williams

Black families in urban areas encountered in the 1970s. "Keepin' your head above water," (i.e. staying afloat during tough times, especially financial ones) was what the project-dwelling Evans family achieved through hustle economics. From the *Good Times* setting and attire, to how they dealt with financial crises on screen, Tandem narrated various modes of the Evans' "keeping their heads above water," some relatable and some damaging (due to Tandem's problematic depiction of them) to the reality of Black life in the ghettoes of project housing.[241] Hustle economics are not simply the ways in which Black people must resort to informal networks and economies to make ends meet, but also the space and place that these economies require.

Space and Place

There is a rich power in the concept of space and place. However, as urban landscape theorist Dolores Hayden notes, "social scientists have frequently avoided 'place' as a concept, and thus have sidetracked the sensory, aesthetic, and environmental components of the urbanized world in favor of more quantifiable research with fewer epistemological problems."[242] But, I believe that the process that transforms and creates place demands more analysis because a place is a source of identification and memory. As Hayden suggests, "if place does provide an overload of possible meanings for the researcher, it is place's very same assault on all ways of knowing (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste) that makes it powerful as a source of

[241] A *ghetto* is a part of a city in which members of a minority group live, typically as a result of social, legal, or economic pressure.

[242] Hayden, Dolores. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, MIT Press, 1995, p.18.

memory."[243] Whether through the built environments of the *Good Times* set or through the actual Cabrini-Green Housing Projects that it is based upon, space and place create a culture and an identity in an urban landscape that is subject to viewer identification.

According to Norman Lear, *Good Times* producers invited Black audiences more frequently to tapings: at their maximum, they made up 60-80% of the audience.[244] With *Good Times*, Lear claims that "Black audiences gave to the show the way that they give to preachers, as they fully embraced their emotions in the live tapings."[245] To Lear, that was the greatest experience in working on *Good Times*—seeing a Black audience give full voice to seeing themselves on set.[246] But, how exactly are they seeing themselves? What is rarely discussed is actually how Lear, Yorkin, and Tandem Productions handled the production of this Black space in the housing projects and how they utilized *Good Times* as the symbol of life in this space. The choice of setting for *Good Times* is integral to understanding the show's approach to Black urban and working-class space in the 1970s. Housing projects, of course, are government owned properties largely rented to the poor and underserved, such as the Evans family in *Good Times.*

Despite the critical acclaim from television reviewers, critics, and audiences, *Good Times* had the potential to vitiate its art by failing to remain sensitive to housing project's political history and its community members' socioeconomic realities. As Soyini Madison puts it, "entering a public sphere enlivens scrutiny, enlarges responsibility, and cracks open into plain

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[243] Ibid.

[244] "Norman Lear," *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*. https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/norman-lear#interview-clips

[245] Ibid.

[246] Ibid.

sight hidden wrongs."[247] When using a public space for the sake of art it is important to have a knowledge of the history and culture of that space as to not reflect the space counter to its reality. Although CBS sent out a crew to the Cabrini-Green housing project in Chicago (where the show is fictionally set) to check on the authenticity of the show, the task of connecting with the poor Black community was largely left to the show's stars.[248] CBS's parachute authenticity of simply dropping in then leaving, makes space for misinterpretation of the project housing living conditions. In response, the stars of *Good Times*, such as Esther Rolle and John Amos, initiated additional trips to housing projects to connect with the community they portrayed on screen. In an *Ebony Magazine* (written by and for Black communities) article covering the stars' visits to Cabrini-Green, Esther Rolle comments that she wants *Good Times* to be "a show of quality, rather than doing a pure comedy."[249] Here, I believe Rolle is saying that a quality show depends on authenticity, so visiting the space in which their show is framed around is essential to that realism. This statement was coupled with a picture of Rolle at a recent visit to Chicago, where she was visiting the Cabrini-Green housing project, talking to its residents, and engaging with the neighborhood children.[250] In a letter from the Atlanta, Georgia City-Wide Advisory Council on Public Housing, Inc., Chairperson Lilla Capers thanks CBS Vice President of Programming

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[247] Madison, Soyini D. *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 6.

[248] Bob Lucas, "A Salt Pork and Collard Greens TV Show" in *Ebony Magazine* June 1974, p. 53. The show never specifically states that the Evans' live in the Cabrini-Green Homes. However, because of the establishing shots in the opening credits, and the shows co-creator Eric Monte being born and raised in the Northside of Chicago and the Cabrini-Green Homes, the show's location is inferred to be based within Cabrini-Green and confirmed via interviews with Norman Lear.

[249] Louie Robinson, "Bad Times on the 'Good Times' Set" in *Ebony Magazine* Sept. 1975, p. 36.

[250] Ibid.

(Perry Lafferty), for John Amos' presence in Atlanta.[251] As their guest of honor on Public Housing Day, July 26th, 1975, Amos was presented awards declaring him head of household of public housing's First Family, an honorary citizen of the City of Atlanta, and an honorary Tenant of public housing. With this letter it is clear that some public housing representatives in the U.S. valued and appreciated the representation of low-income housing and families as seen on *Good Times*. This image allowed Lilla Capers and her colleagues see themselves on screen.

After the breakout success of Tandem's crown jewel, *All in the Family*, the company worked their CBS television shows through the production offices in the upper levels of Hollywood's TV City. It is critical to note the circumstances and space in which these sitcoms were produced. Citing Lynn Spigel and her analysis on the rise of network television, it is understood that, "television is not just programs, but also trademarks, advertisements, credit sequences, and station graphics."[252] The TV City sound stages became sites in which (through fantasy and staging) a production places its viewers in worlds outside of Hollywood. For example, *Good Times*, televised live in Hollywood, placing its audience in the Evans' home in the projects on the Northside of Chicago, Illinois. Like almost all of the Tandem sitcoms the opening credits consist of a flyover opening to establish the city in which the show takes place.

[251] Letter from Lilla Capers to Perry Lafferty, 8/12/1975. Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box "Correspondence-Good Times," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*.

[252] Spigel, Lynn. *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television.* The University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 71.


GOOD
TIMES







Figures 4-7 Opening sequence shots of *Good Times*.

The opening credits of *Good Times* begin with long shots of Chicago at large, then to specifically the Northside of Chicago with children playing in the street, to the outside of the Cabrini-Green housing projects where the Evans family lives, and finally the opening credits end by zooming in through the window into the domestic space of the Evans' apartment. The Black poor have a deeply rooted history with housing projects such as these across major urban cities in the United States, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. These projects pack individuals tightly together and represent spaces of immobility.

Ironically, the spaces in which Tandem's Black sitcoms took place are reflective of the 1960's uprisings by Black communities in major cities (e.g., New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago).[253] These areas were highlighted as areas of national concern by President Lyndon Johnson's creation of the Kerner Commission, which sought to find strategies to end the racial uprisings in these various areas across the United States. The lead member of the commission,

[253] "How the 1960s riots hurt African Americans" The National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/digest/sep04/w10243.html

Otto Kerner, was in fact the governor that represented Illinois and thus Chicagoans (like the fictional Evans') were his constituents. The Commission suggested that one of the main causes of urban violence and racial uprisings was White racism. The Commission suggested that White America bore much of the responsibility for Black rioting and rebellion. It called to create new jobs and more importantly, here, to construct new housing in order to put a stop to de facto segregation and to wipe out the destructive ghetto environment.[254] The Commission's report recommended government programs provide needed services, including the help of more diverse and sensitive police forces and, most notably, investing billions in housing programs aimed at breaking up residential segregation.[255] Among other points, the Commission's suggestions included:

- "Unless there are sharp changes in the factors influencing Negro settlement patterns within metropolitan areas, there is little doubt that the trend toward Negro majorities will continue."
- "Providing employment for the swelling Negro ghetto population will require ...opening suburban residential areas to Negroes and encouraging them to move closer to industrial centers…"
- "...cities will have Negro majorities by 1985 and the suburbs ringing them will remain largely all white unless there are major changes in Negro fertility rates, in migration settlement patterns or public policy."
- "...we believe that the emphasis of the program should be changed from traditional publicly built slum based high rise projects to smaller units on scattered sites."[256]

Through these points of action, the Kerner Commission called for radical shifts in residential areas in the major metropolises throughout the U.S. They believed that these changes in desegregating housing would offer access to more industrial jobs and comfortable living spaces, that would in turn, decrease political angst of the Black working class. Moving from the slum based high rises, similar to the one that houses the Evans family, to smaller scattered sites

[254] National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. 1967, p. 115.

[255] Ibid.

[256] Ibid., 115-120.

would help Black people become engrained in major cities rather than literally stacked on top of one another. Breaking up residential segregation had the potential of radical societal and socioeconomic change. This report was created as a call to action in shifting racial unrest just seven years prior to the premiere of *Good Times*, which may suggest that Lear and Yorkin of Tandem Productions considered policy research or residential segregation in their production choices.

In a Massachusetts Institute of Technology newsletter focused on the goals of the Chicago Housing Authority, MIT professor of urban planning Lawrence Vale explains a major reason why housing projects were so attractive to the working class. Until the mid-20th century in Chicago and across the nation, public housing was often "a kind of reward" for steadily employed working class families who soon left for private housing.[257] While the first decades of projects were built with higher construction standards and a broader range of incomes and same applicants, over time project housing increasingly became the housing of last resort in many cities. Furthermore, housing projects have also been seen to greatly increase concentrated poverty in a community, leading to several negative externalities.[258] Trends showing an increase in geographic concentration of poverty became evident by the 1970s as upper and middle class residents vacated property in U.S. cities.[259] Those in city governments, political organizations, and suburban communities resisted the creation of project housing units in middle and working

[257] Dizikes, Peter. "Chicago Hope." *MIT News*, (March 3rd, 2003). http://news.mit.edu/2011/chicago-public-housing-0303.

[258] Semuels, Alana. "New York City's Public-Housing Crisis" *The Atlantic*. May 19th, 2015. https://web.archive.org/web/20160531234646/http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/05/new-york-citys-public-housing-crisis/393644/

[259] Massey, Douglas S. Kanaiaupuni, Shawn M. "Public Housing and the Concentration of Poverty." *Social Science Quarterly* 74.1 University of Texas Press, 1993, pp. 109-122.

class neighborhoods, leading to the construction of such units around ghetto neighborhoods which already exhibited signs of poverty.[260] Thus by the 1970s, the urban poor had become concentrated in theses high-rise projects.

Specifically, the notorious Cabrini-Green housing projects in Chicago, hold a long national symbol of urban plight. "At its peak, Cabrini-Green was home to 15,000 people, living in mid- and high-rise apartment buildings totaling over 3,607 units."[261] Over the years, crime, gang violence, and neglect created deplorable living conditions for the residents, and the "Cabrini-Green" name became synonymous with the problems associated with public housing in the United States.[262] For Tandem and CBS to frame America's first Black television family in such an atmosphere speaks to a popular raced-based understanding of a homogeneous Black working class living space.

Sociologist and media scholar Herman Gray categorizes Black sitcoms like *Good Times* as being a part of a "separate but equal" or "pluralist" discourse.[263] In these sitcoms, predominantly Black casts demonstrate that Black families have the same basic problems as White families. However, no matter their class status, the majority of sitcoms about White families (i.e. *All in the Family* and *Maude*) take place in favorable and safe living conditions and within single family homes. In fact, White families also lived in the projects; however, a study of project housing found that project housing has differing effects on the concentration of Black poverty

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[260] Ibid.

[261] Saulny, Susan"At Housing Project, Both Fear and Renewal." *The New York Times* (March 18, 2007).

[262] Ibid.

[263] Gray, Herman. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness.* University of Minnesota Press, 2004. p. 89.

versus White poverty.[264] Project housing's effect on concentrated poverty is doubled for Blacks compared to Whites.[265] *Good Times*, and many other Black sitcoms of this era (such as *Sanford and Son*), recycle the image of the inner city ghetto and projects that pack working class Blacks tightly together. Yet, when the Black co-creator and writer of *Good Times* Eric Monte (who in fact based the original plot on his own life growing up in Cabrini-Green), was asked how *Good Times* differed from its Tandem predecessors (*Sanford and Son*), which is also about poor people, Monte made an important point; he stated, "Why ol' man Sanford," said Monte, "owns his own home, his own business; he's got a credit rating. He's practically middle class. These people own nothing."[266] Together, these two shows (*Sanford and Son and Good Times*) made poverty a staple of Black televisual representation in the 1970's. Hence, this reproduced image of Black families struggling in the inner city begs the question of historical accuracy. In his article, "Racial Order of Suburban Communities: Past, Present, and Future," Bruce Haynes discusses post-war American communities and the shift of suburban lifestyles and inhabitants. He finds that post-WWII America is characterized by the steady growth of the suburban Black middle class. However, looking at media and housing policy, "this growth has been overshadowed by the mischaracterization of the suburbs as conformist and racially homogeneous."[267]

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[264] Holloway, Steven R., Deborah Bryan, Robert Chabot, Donna M. Rogers, and James Rulli. "Exploiting the Effect of Public Housing on the Concentration of Poverty in Columbus, Ohio." *Urban Affairs Review* 33.6, 1998, p. 767-89.

[265] Ibid.

[266] Smith, Cecil. "Florida Moves to Chicago via CBS" in *The Los Angeles Times*, 02/18/1974.

[267] Haynes, Bruce. "Racial Order of Suburban Communities: Past, Present, and Future." *Sociology Compass* 2/4 (2008): 1245-51.

Featuring the Evans' in *Good Times* as the Black American family living in the ghetto has the potential to create a static image of all Black people stuck in urban ghettos in the post-war United States. I believe this to be the case because *Good Times* is one of the earliest images of Black families on screen and thus founds the image of Black life in a space of poverty. By the 1970s, I agree with Haynes when he explains that when the suburban form came to "dominate everything from politics to television," Blacks were viewed as "left behind in the so-called inner city."[268] Through repeated media images similar to *Good Times*, Blacks have become synonymous with inner city ghettos while Whites have been the symbol of home ownership and the suburbs. When television shows do not represent the heterogeneity of certain communities, it has the potential to present stereotypical and static representations of various groups.

Screening Hustle Economics

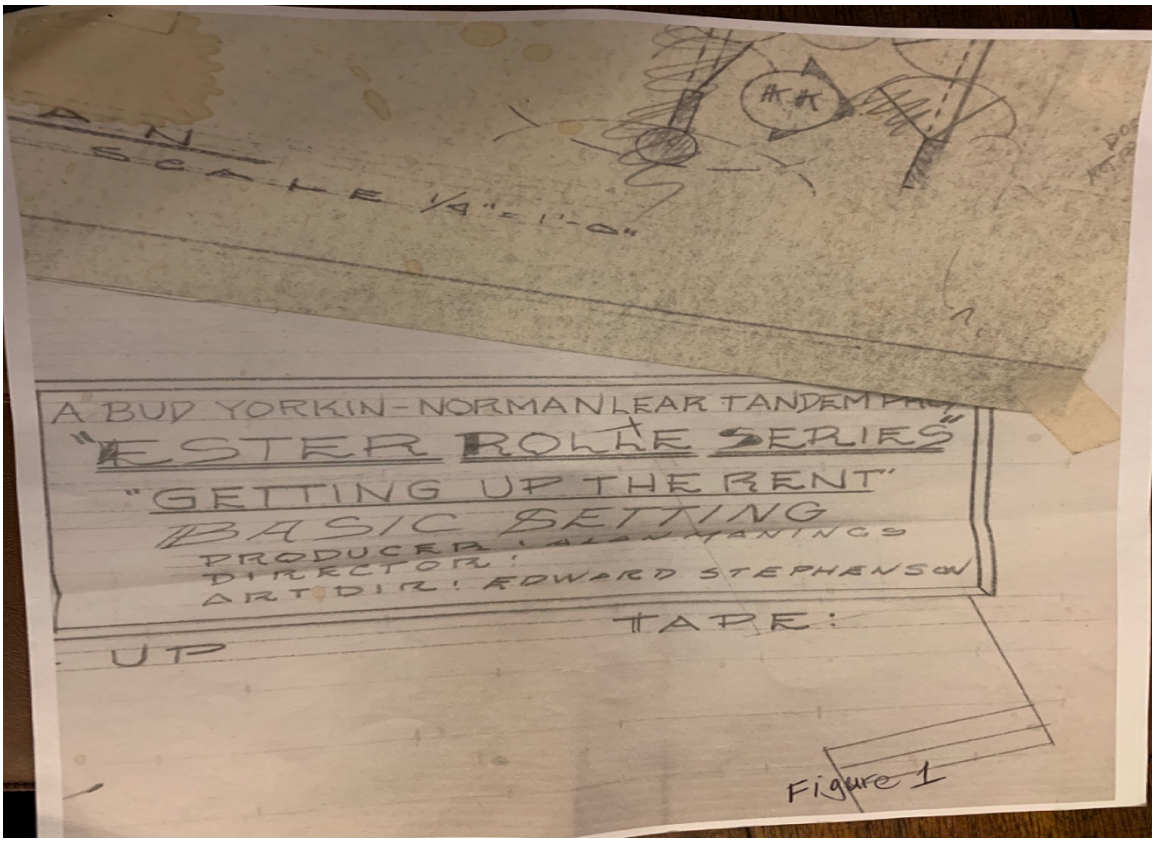
To develop a greater understanding of the racial space and place of *Good Times* it is important to look beyond the Northside of Chicago and the Cabrini-Green housing projects to the specific built image of the Evans' fictional apartment home. Throughout the show's tenure, the audience saw the day-to-day action of the Evans family taking place in the private domestic sphere of their home. Through set design, furniture, and artistic direction two thousand miles away in Television City, CBS and Tandem created the space of a low-income Chicago project. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the role of production design in *Good Times* as integral to our understanding the racial framing of the show at large. A key figure in the creation of the Evans' space is the sitcom's Art Director and Production Designer, Edward Stephenson. A

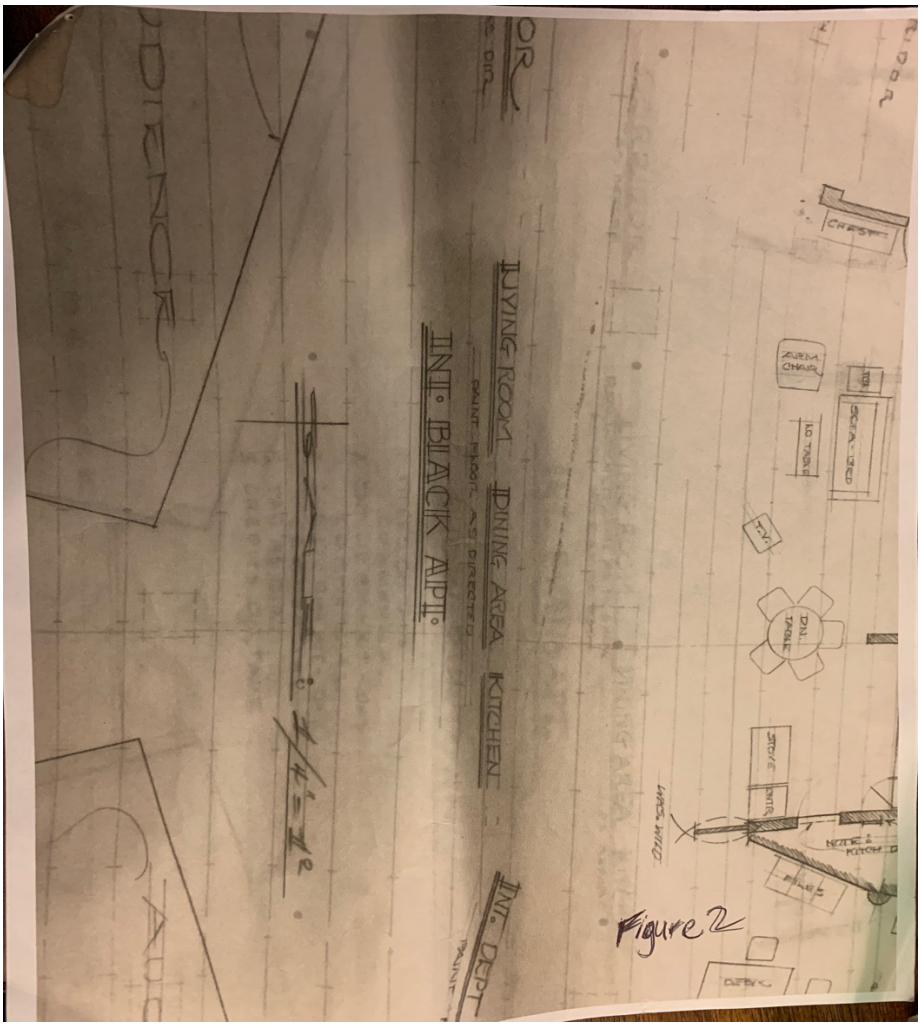
[268] Ibid.

long-term partner of Tandem, Stephenson worked to design the settings for almost all of Lear and Yorkin's productions. The production designer has a lot of input at the early, formative stages of program development. In this role, Stephenson was responsible for the entire look of the program. In his scholarly writing on the practice of production design on television, Terry Byrnes believes that, "in order to work successfully the production designer must be capable of originating a style which will identify a particular program in the public mind, from the look of the lighting sets, and costumes to the typefaces used in the opening graphics and closing credits."[269] Watching an episode of *Good Times* in conversation with *All in the Family*, for example, it is clear that the politics and set designs of a working class family are raced (that is, inherent differences exist in the construction of a Black vs. a White home setting). The Evans family fits a family of five in a small two-bedroom apartment stacked upon a series of other apartments. Their furniture is minimal, secondhand, and worn, the paint on the walls is in a beige hue, and the chipped furniture ranging from browns, yellows, oranges, and the occasional green, make up their living space as rather bleak, even as their clothing brought vibrancy and flavor. Space is cramped in *Good Times* with the father and mother, sleep in the master bedroom, while the two sons Michael and J.J. share the couch pull-out bed; only the sole daughter,

[269] Byrne, Terry. *Production Design for Television*. Focal Press, 1993, p.18.

Thelma, has her own room. This setting suggested that the Black working class bears little resemblance to the White working class.





Figures 8 and 9 “Esther Rolle Series” and “The Black Apartment”

Stephenson’s role shaped the national understanding of a Black familial space and how Tandem deployed its image. Stephenson’s personal papers and set design sketches for the entire first season of *Good Times* are at the University of California, Los Angeles Special Collections; they tell a deeper narrative of the racial politics of the show’s development and its difficulties

in establishing continuity. The first sketch layout of the Evans' home and the sketch notes describe the drawing as "The Esther Rolle Series, Basic Setting."[270] Notably, Stephenson describes the sketch as the "Interior of the *Black* Apartment"—not yet knowing that they were to be dubbed the Evans family.[271] Although a small detail, this description begs the question of whether the family surname was "Black," or if, in fact, Stephenson's visualization of this home is representative of all "Black" families. Either way calling the family "Black" indicates the show's racial politics at play in constructing this setting. Along with the setting, building the image of the Black family required a particular artistry in the character's acting, line delivery, and especially the costuming.

> "Clothes must be harmonized to the mood, be it comedy, tragedy, or romance; they must add subtly to the grace of the wearer; and they must enhance the rhythmic flow of the story. Never must they call undue attention to themselves, unless for sharp definition of character, and they must have originality of detail within the certain bounds of good tastes."[272]

Clothing helps to define the character of a given person on camera, and is a primary factor in the visual process by which the audience decides how it is going to react to a specific person.[273] The costume designer works very closely with the director and the production designer, taking an important role in defining the look and believability of the production. The entire pro-

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[270] Edward Stephenson Papers (1956-1986). Collection PASC 143. University of California, Los Angeles Performing Arts Special Collections. Figure 1. At this point in the development of the show, it does not have a name but rather nods to the central character, Esther Rolle, in her reprisal of Florida Evans from *Maude* (1972-1978).

[271] Ibid., Figure 2.

[272] Fields, Alice Evans. "Costume Design," in *Hollywood, USA: From Script to Screen*, Vantage, 1952, p.115.

[273] Byrne, Terry. *Production Design for Television.* Focal Press, 1993.

duction must take on a costume style and texture that is right for the story. In an interview conducted by the Archive of American Television, which focuses on the people involved in broadcast history, and to that end, interviews TV legends in all professions, focuses on the award-wining costume designer Rita Riggs.[274] In the interview, Riggs describes her early career in the costume department at CBS in 1954 and chronicles working with Tandem Productions throughout the 1970s on. Her interview gives an important vantage point on the framing and creation of the literal and physical image of the Black poor persona that she helped to illustrate on *Good Times*. When asked about the atmosphere on set, Riggs takes a seemingly uncomfortable pause and states, "not always fun; they came around to the comedy sometimes in a harder way."[275] Coming around to the comedy in *Good Times* was often difficult to certain stars of the show as the comedy that was written for them did not reflect the ways in which they intended to use their characters in portraying Black life in the projects. This discontent often led to the set being "not always fun" as it often drew dispute between actors, writers, and even producers. Whether from issues with narrative content to costuming, where everyone wanted to look their best, the development of this environment was at times met with controversy.

At the beginning of the interview, in comparison to *Sanford and Son*, Riggs describes her costuming experience with *Good Times* as "the best, because everything had to be in an economic range, you wanted it to look real, and washed down, and lived in."[276] In this opening line of the interview it is established that what is real and believable to audiences of poor Black

[274] "Rita Riggs," *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*. http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/rita-riggs.

[275] Ibid.

[276] Ibid.

families are the worn clothes and the story they help to illuminate. Riggs essentially styled the idea of the 1970s Black poor. Describing the palette of the show, Riggs states, "I tried to keep it poor…asking myself what can be stylish and fashionable on very little money,"[277] much in line with the previously mentioned sets that Edward Stephenson constructed. Costume detail "often stood, again and again, for the same thing and could be counted on to provide the most basic information about a character for the spectator, that is, it typified."[278] Riggs often chose to dress Rolle in apricots and orange colors to accentuate the warmth and maternal air to her character. Riggs hints that even the sewing machine prop on the set was a part of Florida's costume.[279] The sewing machine helped to create the illusion of Florida's hands as never idle. Whether cooking, cleaning, or sewing the children's clothes the women's work is never done. The patriarch, James Evans Sr., constantly expressed his manhood and control over the household. To make ends meet, James worked odd jobs throughout the day and night always overworked, underpaid, and stressed. John Amos, who played older than he actually was for the role of James Evans, was often clothed in tattered and worn apparel to create an image of his tiredness, poverty, and of him being overworked. However, his costume is uniquely used at times to push the narrative story line in often exaggerated ways for the sake of comedy. For instance, in "Too Old Blues" when James is on his way to an important job interview, he rids himself of his usual plaid Pendleton shirt, khakis, and boots and throws on an olive-green suit. Wearing what Florida calls his "going to a funeral shirt," to the comedic pleasure of the audience, James laughs

[277] Ibid.

[278] Gaines, Jane. "Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells a Woman's Story" in eds: Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog, *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, Routledge, 1990, p.187.

[279] "Rita Riggs," *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*.

and responds "Why not?! Today I'm burying poverty!"[280] Here, it is apparent that the clothing choice works to advance the narrative of a poverty-stricken man attempting to "look the part," in order to gain employment. Unfortunately, James doesn't receive said job, so the next day his plaid and khakis are put back into the quotidian rotation, a fixed identity that the audience is accustomed to.

J.J., the Evans' oldest child, was written as the comic relief and the constant running gag of the show. Riggs claims, "the most outrageous clothes that I have ever done were for J.J., as he was a walking sight gag."[281] J.J. was often draped in long turtlenecks that defined his goofy and lengthy figure and often was adorned with a floppy cap atop his head to symbolize his clownish personality. Thelma, the Evans' only daughter, is understated every day to her role as the person who assists her mother with household duties while trying to keep up with her image as a beautiful young woman. Michael, the youngest of the children, is trapped in the spirit of 1960s civil rights movements and militancy. With aspirations of becoming a lawyer, he is constantly looked upon as the smartest member of the family. Riggs believed Michael's character to be a symbol of "hope of the next generation for Black viewers watching the show, the generation that was going to march."[282] As his character reflected militancy and Black Power, Riggs costumed Michael with clothing from Army surplus stores, further adding to the hand-me-down look and feel of poverty that the show illustrates. For example, in the episode, "Get-

[280] *Good Times* Season 1 Episode 1 "Too Old Blues" by: Bob Peete, 02/08/1974.

[281] "Rita Riggs," *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*.

[282] Ibid.

ting Up the Rent" Michael storms into the Evans' home after playing a game of "Cops vs. Militants" outside.[283] He is angry that his friend kept making Michael be the cop, when in actuality, Michael is dressed in a green fatigued army jacket, adorned with Black Power pins, pictures of Africa, and the Red, Black, and Green symbol of Pan Africanism. Embodying the militaristic spirit of Michael, the costuming here is fitted to the character like a second-skin—and relays information to the viewer about a "person" and their "personality" that exists throughout the series.[284]

Last but not least, beaming with young beauty and energy, Willona's quick-witted humor acts as a powerful supporter to the Evans family. Described by Riggs as the most difficult character to dress, Riggs sees Willona as the "fashion plate for the ghetto. I don't care what color you are, she had style and we tried to make it look as though it didn't cost very much."[285] Willona personified a low socioeconomic cultural tradition of making the most of what you have to define your own self-image because "style doesn't always cost a lot."[286] The costuming helped to set the scene and developed the characters in a way that solely their dialogue was unable to. In framing a poor Black family on television, these production choices were integral in building and popularizing how Black communities in the projects are ever resilient to keep their heads above water. Along with the styling of the stage and the character's attire, the narrative content of *Good Times* episodes worked to illustrate hustle economics on screen.

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[283] *Good Times* Season 1 Episode 3 "Getting Up the Rent" by: Eric Monte, 02/22/1974.

[284] Gaines, Jane. "Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells a Woman's Story" in eds: Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog, *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, Routledge, 1990, p.181.

[285] "Rita Riggs," *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*.

[286] Ibid.











Figures 8-12 Costuming on *Good Times*.

"Getting Up the Rent"

Screening hustle economics in Black sitcoms depicts Black people resorting to informal networks and economies (under-the-table deals, lying, blackmail, favors, etc.) to make ends meet, counter to the economic measures White characters rely on (family networks, union jobs, etc.) in sitcoms focused on White families. Resorting to and practicing these informal economies have the potential pitfall of reinforcing negative representation of Black people. In *Good Times* "Getting Up the Rent," written by the Black writer and co-creator of the show Eric Monte, the Evans' are forced to rush and gather rent money or else they will be evicted at the end of the day, this rush resorts in them considering multiple forms of hustle economics. After coming home from a long night of working on a building, James comes home with only six dollars of payment. James explains that he was paid a lot more but after they took out "federal

withholding taxes, state withholding taxes, unemployment compensation, and state disability insurance," that is all he was left with. James chuckles to himself and says, "If I worked for them a few more hours, I'd end up owing them ten bucks." It is later discovered that James is hired on a case-by-case basis from a good friend of his who informs him about various odd jobs. His unstable employment contributes to his lack of financial stability.

This particular *Good Times* exhibits the histories of Black men in the blue-collar sector and how and can be connected to what has been written about them. Deidre Royster's research on the disparities amongst Black and White blue-collar workers in *Race and the Invisible Hand: How White Networks Exclude Black Men from Blue-Collar Jobs*, is in conversation with *Good Times* and compels us to think about how television sitcoms highlight these racial disparities regarding class.[287] Royster carries out her own scientific study after observing the apparent predicament of many Black men she had grown up with who have experienced racism and negative life outcomes. Many of these Black men, having a limited education, must train for various types of skilled labor in order to obtain a place in the blue-collar job market. Rooting her research in a larger history of Blacks in the blue-collar sector, Royster then focuses qualitatively on interviews of fifty men both White and Black in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, who have graduated from vocational training in Baltimore, Maryland and their life stories up to this point.[288] Royster finds that although they have received adequate training, the ability to obtain and maintain employment is consequently more difficult for the Black men. Royster focuses her study to discuss the problem of embeddedness with regards to job networks. This idea

[287] Royster, Deidre. *Race and the Invisible Hand: How White Networks Exclude Black Men from Blue-Collar* Jobs, University of California Press, 2003.

[288] Ibid., 11.

of an embeddedness approach suggests that "personal and institutional contacts may be extremely valuable in connecting workers to employment opportunities, and a lack of useful contacts may hinder many individuals…from finding out opportunities and being considered for available positions."[289] With a history of segregated job networks, it is clearer how the idea of embeddedness works to create greater racial disparities in the blue-collar job market.

The history of Blacks in America has left them in a position in which they have never been "affiliated with well-placed institutions or enmeshed with powerful informal networks."[290] The greater one's network, the greater their opportunity to hear about job openings and promotional opportunities, if that network is reliable and useful. Although the triumphs of the civil rights movement included a greater sense of equal opportunity amongst Black people, the numbers of employed Black men in blue-collar fields were still unequal to their White counterparts when discussing population percentages of Blacks and Whites. These interpersonal and institutional networks that White people are accustomed to have remained before and after civil rights. *Good Times* conforms to this image as the audience consistently sees that James' is consistently led astray by his fellow project dwellers when he is in need of employment or advice. After this movement, opportunity to gain employment was addressed, however, the historical conditions (networks) explained by embeddedness, were not. This is why in most fields of labor; a White man wins the acquisition of employment.[291] Understanding the presence of these networks before and after civil rights aids in the understanding of the way blue-collar Black men have been visualized on television. As *Good Times* received consistent critique regarding

[289] Ibid., 17.

[290] Ibid.

[291] Ibid., 14.

its portrayal of a Black father struggling to find employment, journalist Carl T. Rowan came to the defense of the show. Rowan believes that what the critics don't seem to know, is that in this society one able-bodied Black out of nine can't even get a job, let alone hold one, and that means a million Black people out of work.[292] That *Good Times* father is tragically "typical" of what the Black male worker faces in America.[293]

Looking further into instances and themes throughout "Getting Up the Rent," the laborious tasks of a Black blue-collar father and his family being forced to engage with hustle economics in multiple ways is clear. In "Getting Up the Rent," when repossession men come to remove the contents of the Evans' home, Michael plays the race card. In efforts of cultural and community engagement and pity from the movers, Michael calls the mover a "jive brotha" and scolds him for putting other brothas out on the street. Here, we see Tandem recycling stories of Black property struggles as this resistance of the repossession men connects to the resistance of Fred Sanford in *Sanford and Son* (Chapter Two) when he is soon to be evicted. James, realizing that he is left with no other choice, pleads with the repossession men for an extension, they oblige and give him until the end of the day to gather the funds for rent. When granted the extension the family quickly gathers to discuss methods of getting the money. Here is where various economics come into play. Resorting to his past days as a hustler, James puts on his coat to head to the pool hall and hustle money. Concurrently, J.J., Thelma, and Michael construct an elaborate department store hustle, in which they would faint in the middle of the store to gain sympathy and financial assistance from passersby, an idea met with much scrutiny by James and Florida. Too prideful and unwilling to take a "handout," James refuses Willona's idea of

[292] Rowan, Carl T. "Two 'black' TV shows: 'Good Times' and bad" in *Washington Post*, 1974.

[293] Ibid.

receiving an emergency loan from the welfare office and heads out the door. Still believing that there is a chance, Willona takes Florida to the welfare office where they are denied welfare assistance. Claiming that because James made $100 dollars too much last year in his annual income, the welfare system falls short in its design meant for assistance. To her surprise Florida says, "I didn't know $4,200 was the limit for a family with three kids."

In retrospect, the plot of this *Good Times* episode deals with the family doing whatever they have to so that they do not sink deeper into their current conditions of poverty. Three instances of hustle economics are illustrated here: first, it relies on the cultural connection of race to receive more time to gather the necessary funds for rent; second, it relies on lying and scheming at a department store; third, and finally, it depicts characters heading to the pool room to gamble and hustle the money through a string of pool matches. In contrast, the Evans' attempt to resort to the formal economy of seeking government assistance through welfare. However, their attempts of gathering funds in the legal and formal matter are blocked—forcing them to accept money from the informal routes described here. Ever resilient, these working-class Black people in the projects may lie, succumb to desperation, and break the law as a means to attain money and stay afloat, even if just for another day.

With his pool cue in hand, James goes to the pool hall and is able to hustle other pool players for the rent money. This informal economy of underground gambling speaks to the lengths that Blacks must go to stay afloat within a larger system that is pinned against them. Through numerous instances such as these, the Evans family is put to the test throughout the duration of the series. Their agency, resilience, and strength as a family is continuously tested through their woes of living in the projects, feeding themselves, clothing themselves, and getting up the rent. These scenes of engagement with hustle economies, along with those on *Sanford and Son*, add to a developing history of economic instability in Black sitcoms. However,

through this instability, Black families are forced to contend with whatever means possible in order to remain in their perpetual state of poverty—just barely making it by. At the helm of all of these tests is the matriarch Florida Evans, played by Esther Rolle. The tests of agency and resilience that Rolle had to endure consistently took place on screen with *Good Times* and off screen with Tandem and CBS.

Part 2: *"Remember, I've been Black the longest"*: Esther Rolle's Impact at Tandem Productions

In the 1970s, Black women played an important role in publicizing the concerns of Black artists within the television industry—and specifically in Black sitcoms. Through interviews and comments in mainstream magazines, Black actresses participated in a culture of resistance by critiquing television's images and the industry's approach to race. What many scholars have neglected to put in conversation regarding these Black sitcoms are the ways in which these critiques of the Black feminine image may align with images and critiques of Black masculinity. To take it a step further, this section specifically will focus on Esther Rolle as a force of revolution in television through her role of Florida Evans on *Good Times* and *Maude* and her acts of resistance at Tandem Productions in efforts to define herself as a Black woman and defend the image of the Black community. It is important to state here that many of the interviews cited are from *Ebony Magazine*, a monthly magazine written by and for the African American market. To be clear, this source may often have a bias that is clearly written by and for a Black audience, but I believe this source is of serious importance in discussing the woes of Black artists and serves as a space where they can speak freely and with depth. They were able to speak more freely with *Ebony*, because *Ebony* was written by and for Black communities, as a source of information, news, and current events relevant to Black people. As the

archival sources reveal little about Black women at Tandem, this section relies heavily on interviews, news coverage, magazines, and textual analyses of particular episodes to create an important narrative that encapsulates Esther Rolle's impact at Tandem Productions and television at large. As an agent of change in 1970s television production, Esther Rolle used her characters in Tandem sitcoms to not only add depth to the identity of Black womanhood on television but also to advocate for a greater diversity of images of the Black community. Through her acting and interviews, Esther Rolle participates in a culture of resistance by critiquing television's images and the industry's approach to race, specifically here, the Black domestic in the sitcom *Maude*. Much of the existing literature on Rolle involves her work as Florida Evans on *Good Times*, but along with that I also bring into the discussion the show where that character came to fruition.

An *Ebony Magazine* cover story from September 1975 makes clear that a great majority of the popular sitcom *Good Times* cast sought for change in its writing and production.[294] In summary of the article, *Ebony* writer Louie Robinson concluded that the cast wanted changes, including expansion and deepening of to the program's characters and plot. The story, which relied on interviews with each cast member, makes clear the resounding urge among them to have their characterizations serve a more significant purpose. In the vain of Black actresses exhibiting cultures of resistance, Rolle was often at odds with her co-star Jimmy Walker (who plays the oldest son James Jr. or J.J.) who was quickly becoming a powerful force on *Good Times*. Walker disassociated himself from talk of significant representations, alienating himself from his television family and quite possibly many Black actors in general. Playing the series' most significant comedic role (one with contentious links to histories of Black minstrelsy) as

[294] Louie Robinson, "Bad Times on the 'Good Times' Set" in *Ebony Magazine* Sept. 1975.

the quirky teen artist with the signature catchphrase "Dy-no-mite!," Walker understood the stardom this role bestowed upon him and did not see his role as anything but that, a *role.* When inquired about his role as J.J., Walker is quoted in the article stating:

> "I play it the way I see it for the humor of it. I don't think anybody 20 years from now is going to remember what I said. I am not trying to have my lines etched in some archives or on a wall in some place…I don't think any TV show can put out an image to save people…My advice is do not follow me. I don't want to be a follower or a leader, just a *doer*."[295]

Here we are almost forty-five years later remembering what he said and taking his words to task. Although one image is not going to save an entire people, images are often a reflection of their political and social moment and one must reflect on what that image means, who is it coming from, and what its ramifications are. Walker's position on positive Black TV images differs from the show's Black actresses and their push for better characterizations, chiefly, the show's matriarch and star, Esther Rolle. In direct response to the claims of Walker, Rolle "resents the imagery that says to Black kids that you can make it by standing on a corner saying "Dynomite!"[296] As a whole, the Black actresses of this show see their role as much more than that. They are able to articulate that its impact is so much more. The crux of the *Ebony* article covers the continuing battle amongst the cast members to keep the comedic flavor of the program from becoming so outlandish as to be embarrassing to the Black community. Rolle did not want Walker's humor and "funny little ways cut out," but she thought they had the potential to be real. She thinks there is a happy medium.[297] Ja'Net DuBois, who played Willona, the

[295] Ibid., 38.

[296] Ibid., 35.

[297] Ibid., 34.

witty, flippant, and dependable friend of the Evans family pleads for humanity in the cast's representation of this family and community. She loved *Good Times* because it "pays the rent," however she challenged producers of the program, claiming that "we [the Black cast] should have a little more to say about what we do, because we only know how we feel."[298] With a White executive producer and majority White male writing staff, DuBois articulated how difficult it was to play the roles that were written for her and her cast. Asking the poignant question, "How can you tell a Black woman how to portray a Black woman when she's been one all her life?"[299] With this question, DuBois is suggesting that White writers should not have the right to tell her, as a Black woman, how to play a Black woman. Even as a teenager, Bernadette Stanis (who plays the Evans' only daughter, Thelma) understood the implications of her television role. Since her role was the only teenage Black girl consistently shown on television, Stanis felt certain responsibilities. She claimed, "a lot of young people look up to me…I'm very conscious of that. I want to do the best I can for them."[300] Acknowledging the importance of their representations, these Black actresses are among the first to address how Black women should actually be written.

Although *Good Times'* Black women actors as a whole showed agency in speaking for their own representations, Esther Rolle's efforts in this fight were central. *Good Times* was conceived—even by the show's White producers—as Esther Rolle's show, and her fellow cast members consistently commented that she was not only a phenomenal actor but also head of the on-screen home and the leader of their fight for better representation with production heads.

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[298] Ibid., 40.

[299] Ibid.

[300] Ibid, 42.

DuBois boldly states, "she (Rolle) fights every week for the characters," and is consistently quoted for putting herself up against Lear and other Tandem executives, advocating for a depiction of Black family that exudes pride.[301] Through her work she has changed the image of not only Black women on television but has exhibited that Black actors must not settle for the roles that are simply written for them. While she concedes that every Black actor must make his or her own decisions, she continued to show that she is "more dedicated to doing a show of worth than to doing a funny show," and that every role she takes will have an impact on her community.[302] Rolle had the foresight that each image involuntarily held the burden of representing the race.

> "I've always been selective about my roles… still am… First of all, I have to like me, and I couldn't like me if I depicted crap that made a Black child hang its head. I feel an obligation to do something that will make him stick his little chest out and say, 'Did you see *that*?!' My goal is to give Black women dignity."[303]

With the dual role of actress and advocate, Esther Rolle made it clear that she used her platform in a transformative manner. Tired of seeing the over-saturation of Black women as grinning domestics, Rolle utilized her agency in the creation of *Good Times* to bring a new visualization of Black womanhood to the mainstream. Through *Good Times*, Rolle made it her duty to address stereotypes of the matriarchal Black family and help diversify the televisual image of Black women to one that is deserving of honor and respect.

Until the late 1960s, with *Julia* (1968-1971), the popular characterization of Black women was as domestic workers (or maids) in often docile and compliant roles such as those in

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[301] Ibid., 40.

[302] Ibid., 34.

[303] Bob Lucas, "A Salt Pork and Collard Greens TV Show" in *Ebony Magazine* June 1974, 53.

the radio show and sitcom *Beulah* (1950-1952). These roles as domestics mark a history of what Victoria Sturtevant calls, "dissemblance."[304] This term describes the double consciousness and performance of twoness that Black women were forced to take on and put away as necessary for survival and employment, as 80% of Black women worked as domestics in the 1930s.[305] Dissemblance was a consciously adopted strategy by Black women to play a compliant and docile role in a White household that could effectively protect their true selves from scrutiny.[306] As was true of Hattie McDaniels' acclaimed role as "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), dissemblance as performance was necessary for many Black women to receive a shot in show business.[307] On set, Black women were forced to be compliant, as the role required that they were only able to be their true selves off screen.

Shortly before Rolle as Florida on *Good Times*, the sole image of the Black woman star on television was through Diahann Carroll as Julia in the sitcom *Julia*. Rolle felt as though *Julia* was a step above the grinning domestic and that Black communities were so tired of being inundated with that imagery that they accepted *Julia* as a breath of fresh air amidst its drawbacks on Black realism.[308] Carroll herself believed that her role in *Julia* was an "acceptable"

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[304] Sturtevant, Victoria, "'But things is changin' nowadays an' Mammy's gettin' bored': Hattie McDaniel and the culture of Dissemblance." *The Velvet Light Trap*. Number 44, Fall 1999.

[305] Ibid, 68.

[306] Ibid, 69.

[307] *Gone with the Wind* is a 1939 American historical romance film. Set in the American South against the backdrop of the American Civil War and the Reconstruction era, the film tells the story of Scarlett O'Hara, the strong-willed daughter of a Georgia plantation owner. Hattie McDaniel is featured in the supporting role as the house servant "Mammy." This role led to McDaniel being the first Black person to be awarded an Academy Award.

[308] *Color Adjustment*, Dir. Marlon Riggs, 1991.

image to break down barriers so that Black people could move on from there.[309] This statement is supported by Aniko Bodroghozy when she states that throughout the show's run, popular press articles "castigated *Julia* for being extraordinarily out of touch with and silent to the realities of Negro life in the late 1960s."[310] Although *Julia* often functioned as a site of social tension, Diahann Carroll attempted to use the power of her fame to voice her activism on the realities of Black life in America. Christine Acham addresses this power that Black women were able to wield in their images on television (Diahann Carroll in *Julia* and Esther Rolle in *Good Times*) through their engagement with "hidden transcripts" (spaces where they voiced their activism off screen) in popular magazines and journals.[311] These various transcripts, in magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet*, concluded that Rolle believed it was her responsibility to place a corrective lens over the representation of the Black family, not only for the Black audience but for the large White television audience also. What is important to add here is how this power is translated on screen and where contentions may have led to certain production decisions on set. Particularly what I'd like to add to the conversation is Rolle's introduction into the mainstream as a titan of change.

Eager to leave her own mark in this system of reconstructing recycled images, Lear approached Rolle with an opportunity that has received scant academic discussion: the role of

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[309] Ibid.

[310] Bodroghkozy, Aniko. *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement*. University of Illinois Press, 2013, p. 182.

[311] Acham, Christine *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004. p. 113. To be clear, "hidden transcripts" is a concept developed by James Scott in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, and that the broader reference of this concept is a discussion of public roles played by the powerful and powerless and the mocking, vengeful tone they display off stage—their public and hidden transcripts. Here, Acham has adopted the termite discuss Black television actresses voicing their activism.

Maude Findlay's domestic, Florida Evans, on Tandem Production's *Maude* (1972-1978). Lear offered her the role after witnessing Rolle in a Negro Ensemble production in New York. The Negro Ensemble Company is based on the Black experience, it was created and staffed by Black artists who focus on original works, and it trains Black actors in the fundamentals of theater acting. Using the term "Negro" as a tribute to the Harlem Renaissance and the legacy of its artists, the company sought to invoke an outspoken advocacy of dignity and agency through their art.[312] With Rolle's history in this space, she was coming from a context that did not encourage buffoonery, and her style of portraying Florida reflected that. Although weary with this characterization of a domestic on *Maude*, Rolle used the opportunity to lay to rest previous portrayals of the docile and compliant Black maid. As addressed in the dissertation of L.S. Kim, "the importance of looking at the figure of the maid is that she is a recurrent and patterned image of and occupation for women of color, demonstrating a discourse on and revealing the nexus of race, class, and gender hierarchies in American culture."[313] With regards to the history of racialized domestics, Black women as domestics specifically, have taken various forms throughout television history. "The image of the Black domestic as actress further illuminates the extent to which the culture of dissemblance allowed Black women to adopt not a second personality but a role, an act which was divorced, consciously and completely, from their private identity."[314] Though weary of playing a domestic, Rolle knew that her portrayal was

[312] Hill, Anthony Duane. "The Negro Ensemble Company (1967-)" *Black Past*, 02/13/2008. https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/negro-ensemble-company-1967/.

[313] Kim, Lahn Sung, "Maid in Color: The Figure of the Racialized Domestic in American Television," Dissertation. University of California, Los Angeles, 1997, p. x.

[314] Sturtevant, "Hattie McDaniel and the Culture of Dissemblance," p. 69.

simply an act, however she used her influence to act this role in a fashion different from her predecessors.

Maude

Beatrice Arthur as Maude Findlay was 1970's popular television's voice and image of White liberal feminism. The White woman who stands up to her husband, rejects the role as the guardian of the hearth, has an abortion, and sees herself as the catalyst to changing many of the social ills of the moment. In response to the domestic worker that Esther Rolle was to play on *Maude*, writer and critic, Eugenia Collier believed that portraying Black domestics was simply furthering a White agenda, Rolle wished to complicate that claim.

> "Every Black domestic is an expert on White culture. But Whites (most Whites) have so seldom recognized the humanity of Black people and have had such a compulsion to rationalize their own inhumanity toward Blacks that an honest and compassionate look at Black culture has been virtually impossible. For this reason, I am convinced that there are very few—if, indeed, any—White writers who can portray Black characters in a realistic and believable manner."[315]

In "Maude Meets Florida," early in the series Maude's politics are taken to task by the Black domestic she attempts to hire, Florida.[316] The episode begins with Maude scrambling to clean her home in preparation for her first meeting with the domestic worker she is seeking to hire. Through this initial scene it's clear that because of Maude, the family has faced many interactions with domestic workers. Maude's daughter (Carol) teases her because of the fact that Maude's "White guilt" (without saying these words) is a key contributor to their lack of a stable domestic worker.

Carol: "I suppose we are getting another Black one."

[315] Collier, Eugenia. "*Sanford and Son* is White to the Core" in *The New York Times*. June, 17th, 1973.

[316] *Maude* Season 1 Episode 3 "Maude Meets Florida," 1973.

Maude: "Well, yes, OK, I did ask for one."
Carol: "You spoil them, you see Black and you melt. A Black man says hello and you say sorry."

Because of her White guilt, Maude believes it is her role to undo/redress histories of bigotry, and that one step toward that is to not make Florida feel "unwelcome" in their home. Upon Florida's entrance, Maude fawns over her, trying to make her comfortable. Rolle uses this moment as Florida Evans to redefine the Black domestic: she is witty, smart, and funny. She uses Maude's fawning to her advantage and jokes with her, claiming her agency in the space of a White home as a Black domestic speaking for herself.

Florida: "The first week is a trial basis to see if this arrangement can work."
Maude: "Florida you're not on trial."
Florida: "I know. You are."

Here, Rolle as Florida is taking control in the fact that it is her decision who she chooses to work for, not the decision of her White employers. Florida has agency in the decision of who she works for and how she handles her work. Obvious to Maude's husband and daughter, that Florida simply wants to be there to work and not be berated by Maude's agenda, Maude argues to them that it's her job to change Florida.

Maude: "Florida is not your modern Negro. She hasn't found that new sense of self-respect and militancy, let's face it. Florida is your pre-liberation Southern Black…I intend to treat that woman as an equal. To teach her a new sense of self-respect."

This quote indicates that Maude desires to be the teacher and instructor and, in this way, challenges the transparency and invisibility of Whiteness—critiquing White womanhood. As her first week progresses, Florida deals with the guilt that Maude continues to throw at her. From insisting that she call her Maude instead of Mrs. Findlay and not allowing Florida to enter and exit through the back door of their home (because of the history of its racial overtones),

even when the back door is more convenient. Florida simply complies throughout the first week, even calling Maude the "NAACP." This joke points to yet another moment in which Tandem is addressing its conservative viewership as it allows the viewer to identify with a Black character who not only is distinctively non-political but who mocks and makes fun of the White woman for being like the NAACP. When the week draws to a close and Florida announces that she is not returning, Maude is in utter disbelief.

Maude: "I have been trying to prove that a Black woman can be just as self-respecting and proud as a White woman, but you are too darn dumb to know it."
Florida: "And for one week I have been trying to do my work as a Black woman who is just as proud and self-respecting as any White woman, and you are just too darn dumb to know that!"

Maude then accuses Florida of bigotry and not treating *her* as her equal. Although these words were written for her, Rolle's performance is what crucially stands out in this scene. In standing up to Maude, Florida doesn't break eye contact with her while raising her voice. In fact, Florida holds her head high and moves closer to Maude with each word uttered. She shows that she is neither afraid nor intimidated by Maude's Whiteness. With her hands on her hips and chest out, Florida takes control of the scene and the energy in the room, leaving Maude utterly speechless as Florida quickly exits the home. Explaining to Carol that she won't be returning, Florida is positioned to realize that it is in fact her role to construct her own identity to Maude (a symbol of White liberal feminism) and to educate her on the agency Black women hold specifically, and Black people in general. Here Rolle frames Florida as preferring tradition, showing a more conservative stance while she chides White liberalism. Rolle also shows that she can be a source of comedy on the show in her conversation with Carol upon her not returning to work for them.

Florida to Carol: "I keep running into problems with White liberals that just won't quit."
Carol: "You're not telling me you rather work for a bigot?"

Florida: "No, but at least they don't keep trying to change you. They just hate you as you is."

Deciding to stay, Florida leaves Maude with an ultimatum and last bit of advice regarding her remaining in Maude's employment.

Florida to Maude: "You do what you do good and let me do what I do good or that's that." Maude nods in approval. As Florida exits through the door. "Going out back doors, that's something I do real good."

From this early opportunity, it's clear that Rolle had the intention of using every casting choice as her avenue to permit change. This early performance of Florida Evans was a catalyst in reclaiming the Black domestic and just how much power they wield within a household. After scoring big as the maid in *Maude*, Lear asked the writers Michael Evans and Eric Monte, two young Black men, to create a starring role for her—from here, *Good Times* was born.[317] With the opportunity for a leading role in her own show, Rolle's advocacy for an uplifting representation is seen even more blatant here. Before accepting the role, she asks Lear, "am I going to have some say about this (show)? Remember, I've been Black the longest."[318] From the start, Rolle puts forth that she won't attach her name to a program if her voice isn't heard.

Esther Rolle, as Florida, played her farewell scene on *Maude*, shocking Maude by announcing that she was quitting. Florida's husband Henry (John Amos) had been promoted and they could afford for her to stay home, scrub her own floors, and raise her own children.[319] The following Friday (February 8th, 1974) in the debut of *Good Times*, Florida turned up 1,000 miles away from Tuckahoe, NY to a Chicago, IL housing project with her three children and

[317] "A Salt Pork and Collard Greens TV Show" p. 50.

[318] "Bad Times on the 'Good Times' Set" p. 40.

[319] *Maude* Season 2 Episode 20 "Florida's Goodbye" Feb. 5th, 1974.

her husband, still played by John Amos, who was now named James. Although it branched off from another Tandem show (like *All in the Family* begat *Maude*), other than the main character's name, *Good Times* placed Florida Evans in an entirely different world, so it is difficult to call it a spinoff. Even *Good Times* producer Allan Manings admits to the fragility of the term spinoff in reference to *Good Times*. In an interview he states that, "it [*Good Times*] wasn't really a spinoff…It was one character, and we have changed that character.[320] The Florida Evans that serviced the Findlay family on *Maude* is vastly different than the Florida Evans on *Good Times*. Rolle puts it simply that this new role is a different side of Florida saying, "what I do in my madam's house is a facade, what I do at home is me."[321] These words from Rolle are critical as they debunk the maid figure, speaking to and about dissemblance. Through *Good Times*, Esther Rolle believed that she now had the ability to show her true self, in a space where she is the focus of the family and the hearth.

Esther Rolle and her transition to *Good Times*

With Esther Rolle as the actor at the helm of *Good Times*, the series was one of three female-dominated shows at that time starring Black women, the others being *That's My Mama* (1974-75) and *Get Christie Love!* (1974-75).[322] However, these images of Black womanhood

[320] Ibid, 34.

[321] Ibid.

[322] Haggerty, Sandra "TV and Black Womanhood" in *The Los Angeles Times*, November 6th, 1974. *Thats My Mama*, is a sitcom set in a middle-class African American neighborhood in Washington, D.C., and revolved around the character Clifton Curtis (played by Clifton Davis), a man in his mid-20s who worked as a barber and his loving, but opinionated mother Eloise "Mama" Curtis, who wanted him to settle down and find a nice wife.

were not necessarily favorable by some television critics. Regarding the image of television and Black womanhood in 1974, Sandra Haggerty of the *Los Angeles Times* commented that, "after heightened efforts on the part of Black writers, sociologists and psychologists to shatter the image-degrading myths of Black womanhood (the primary stereotype being that she is super strong, overbearing, castrating, loud, fat, and funky), this season's television depiction of the Black woman is particularly scurrilous."[323] Finding these present images as humorously insulting, throughout her article Haggerty is pleading for what Black American womanhood looks like. She believes that the only redeeming quality of Florida Evans in *Good Times* is that she is married to her man. Sadly, here the institute of marriage seems to be the only symbol of legitimacy and acceptance of the image of Black womanhood in *Good Times*. Haggerty ends her critique pleading to see the "responsible, articulate, sensitive, soft-spoken, and vulnerable Black woman" on the tube.[324] I believe Haggerty's analysis of Esther Rolle in her portrayal of Florida Evans is limited.

Portraying the Evans' family matriarch, Rolle utilized her relationship with Lear to create an image that was originally her own. In countless episodes, Florida is responsible for the livelihood of her family and home, she is articulate in expressing her agency by speaking her mind and taking a stance on what she believes in, and as the show's center, she is the most vulnerable to the pains of the Evan's living circumstances. Rolle was determined to use her portrayal as Florida Evans to make it clear that money isn't everything to poverty stricken Black

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Get Christie Love! is an American crime drama TV series starring Teresa Graves as an undercover African-American female police detective.

[323] Ibid.

[324] Ibid.

families and that strong moral character and values are what will keep a home intact. In a newspaper article discussing her transition to *Good Times* Rolle states, "I think that what the haves in this world don't realize is that all is not lost because you don't have money, there are other values—love, sharing, caring—and if you concentrate on them sometimes you'll ride out the storm."[325] This quote makes it evident that Rolle wanted to use this platform as a space to demonstrate resilience amidst social conditions that are consistently pushing the Black poor to give up, she aimed to make it clear throughout the series that these familial values were what would keep the Evans' afloat through difficult times. However, the ability to portray such a wide-ranging and impactful character is credited to Rolle's resistance at Tandem.

What may seem as a mainstay in television today, the simple act of a Black woman having a husband on screen was revolutionary in 1974. Long before her protests of J.J.'s character mentioned earlier, before production of the series, Rolle had to fight for the representation of a complete Black family. When Lear approached Rolle with the opportunity for her own show, Rolle commented that she was happy to do it (*Good Times*) because she had long wished to redeem the recycled image of the Black woman only being able to portray a domestic worker, she wanted to be a part of a new characterization.[326] Even in her role as a domestic on *Maude*, Rolle knew that her purpose was to redeem that image to open new avenues for Black women on television. After looking at the first script of *Good Times*, Rolle questioned where the children's father was, her husband.[327] Lear commented to her, "there is none, it was written for you

[325] Klemesrud, Judy, "Florida Finds Good Times in Chicago" *New York Times*, 05/05/1974.

[326] *Color Adjustment*, Dir. Marlon Riggs, 1991.

[327] Ibid.

and your three children."[328] Knowing that there was no show without her, Rolle took a stand against Lear and insisted that she had a husband. In response to not having a husband on screen for her family, Rolle responded, "find the actress who can do it, because I can't."[329] Such a resistance at the start of the show, establishes Rolle's position as the center of the show, and that it is in fact *her* show. Lear conceded to the request, and John Amos was written into the pilot of *Good Times*.

Rolle saw that the inclusion of a Black father was necessary to combat a history of oppression against Black men in the home. Discussing with the *New York Times* regarding the myth of the Black woman as the real strength of the Black family, Rolle believed that such a myth came from the reality of Black history. Rolle states that upon reading that *Good Times* was first written without a father, she wasn't very surprised because, "the White man knows that if you castrate the Black man, you can handle the race. The Black man has a hard time getting a job, and his wife is told 'you can't get welfare with a husband in the home…this stings the Black man, so the wife has to spend a lot of time bolstering his ego, because he is in such a shaky position. The myth is that she is the strong force in the family, when the truth is, she has **had** to be the breadwinner."[330] Rolle was well aware that accepting the absence of the father in the show would mean accepting how White executives and society viewed Black men. Rolle believed that accepting the lack of a father took power away from the development of Black communities and their ability to speak for and define themselves. I must admit that this seeming disparagement of matriarchy may conform Rolle into a more conservative outlook on the

[328] Ibid.

[329] Ibid.

[330] Klemesrud, Judy, "Florida Finds Good Times in Chicago" *New York Times*, 05/05/1974.

Black family structure, however, rather than taking a stance on the myth of the Black woman as the strength of the Black family, Rolle points to how the myth became a popular understanding. Taking a stance on whether or not she believed in said myth had the potential to be intraracially divisive (between Black man and Black woman), rather her goal here was to discuss the presence of a complete family unit on-screen. What I find of particular importance in her words is the matter of fact way in which she addresses a history of racial violence at the hands of White people to a popular White-controlled publication.

In addition to her battles with characters in the script, Rolle also sought for drastic changes in the writing rooms at Tandem Productions. While going through table reads and live on set, Rolle exercised her power by often changing some of her lines through improvisation. She refused to be written out of context and she claimed that, "if I don't believe in a line, I change it. And I do. Often, the writer just doesn't have the right idiom."[331] Granted, although these interviews may be largely for the show and self-promotion efforts, I believe it is important to analyze what is said in these interviews as they can work to complicate Rolle's history of contention with Tandem. In making these comments and bringing these struggles to light in the press, Rolle was often risking her position on the show. It was often necessary for Rolle to take control of her own voice rather than the one written for her in order to portray a more authentic representation of her character. Although the concept of *Good Times* was created by two Black people (Eric Monte and Mike Evans) and it discussed the trials of a Black family, Rolle didn't feel there was an obligation for her to have an all-Black production staff.

[331] Ibid.

Rolle believed above all that the production staff must be "human" and of good moral character.[332] However, once pressed, Rolle admits, "if I did feel any obligation, it would be to have some Black women writers. A man just can't give my point of view. I'm screaming louder and louder about it every day, and I've been actively contacting a couple of Black women. I'm pressing my point daily."[333] I believe it may be safe to say that her daily screams were answered with the inclusion of script stories by Patricia Edwards.

Although never receiving full writing credit for her episodes, Patricia Edwards, was credited with the story development of two episodes of *Good Times*, "The Debutante Ball" and "Florida's Protest."[334] Edwards, the former secretary to the writers of *Good Times* and former stage manager for Lear's *One Day at a Time* (1975-1984), developed two stories for Tandem that not only demonstrated Black activism temporally but also the strength of Black women in creating change.[335] This moment on *Good Times* and at Tandem was pivotal because at this time, Edwards served as the first woman to ever receive writing credit on *Good Times* and as the only Black woman to ever receive writing credit for any Tandem Productions sitcom period. The constant pressure of Rolle to the Tandem executives made such a feat possible. Rolle's activism off set led to her being able to depict such activism and strength of Black womanhood on screen in "Florida's Protest."

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[332] Ibid.

[333] Ibid.

[334] *Good Times*, Season 2 Episode 18 "The Debutante Ball." Story by: Patricia Edwards and Teleplay by: Jack Elinson and Norman Paul, Feb. 4th, 1975.

Good Times, Season 3 Episode 11 "Florida's Protest." Story by: Patricia Edwards and Teleplay by: Allan Manings, Nov. 25, 1975.

[335] "People" *Jet Magazine*, June 10th, 1976.

In this episode, Florida becomes outraged when James and the kids receive food poisoning after eating meat from the local supermarket. She organizes a group of concerned citizens and they boycott the market. The protest brings effective results, but not before Florida experiences her first trip to jail. The narrative of this particular episode deserves more analysis due to the various conventions of Black womanhood, poor Black life, and activism that it addresses throughout. With the high price of meat, which the family complains about in multiple instances throughout the series, the Evans' are overjoyed that Florida spent the few extra dollars at Borgan's Market to treat her family with a beef roast for dinner. However, wanting to offer her family this rare delicacy backfires when the next morning the entire family wakes up with food poisoning. When the children ask Florida why she continues to shop at Borgan's given the quality of the products, she laments that "it is the only market available to the neighborhood as the chain ran every other business out and it is the only market around here that we can get to without a car." With the greater majority of the project community relying on public transportation or walking, they have no choice but to purchase groceries there.

This dialogue in the scene draws attention to the real life "food deserts" that exist in poor urban communities throughout the United States.[336] Low-income families tend to be negatively affected by the lack of access to healthy foods because they lack the means to travel to better food options.[337] When prices are high and there is a lack of financial assistance, many

[336] A food desert is an area, especially one with low-income residents, that has limited access to affordable and nutritious food. The designation considers the type and quality of food available to the population, in addition to the number, nature, and size of food stores that are accessible. Story, Mary; Kaphingst, Karen M.; Robinson-O'Brien, Ramona; Glanz, Karen (2008). "Creating healthy food and eating environments: policy and environmental approaches." *Annual Review of Public Health*. 29, pp. 253-272.

[337] Caspi, Caitlin E.; Kawachi, Ichiro; Subramanian, S. V.; Adamkiewicz, Gary; Sorensen, Glorian (October 2012). "The relationship between diet and perceived and objective access to supermarkets among low-income housing residents." *Social Science & Medicine*. 75 (7), p. 1254-1262.

living in places with limited grocery stores find themselves in a situation where they are unable to access the food they need. These food deserts affect a high number of minorities due to them being a large part of the lower socioeconomic class.

Angry with what the spoiled meat has done to her family, Florida gathers her Women's Club to protest and picket the market for their high prices and low quality of food and produce. While throwing her apron to the ground, Florida stands boldly and assertive affirming that her and her group "are going to let Borgan's know that we care about our families too!" As the audience witnesses Florida's protest through the commentary of James and his children watching the television screen, the audience hears the group of protestors marching and chanting "We will not be moved!" while in front of Borgan's Market. Here, protests seem as a sort of spectator sport in which Florida is out of place from her normal domestic place as is now on the front lines fighting for change. The Evans' are proud to see Florida on television fighting for what she believes in (a moment of self-reflexivity), until James rises to his feet with anger seeing his wife being dragged into a cop car and shipped off to jail. An action of peaceful protest is met with time spent in a jail cell. Upon bailing Florida out of jail, James and Florida are determined to confront the individual who put her in jail, so the two head to Borgan's Market to confront the store manager. Much to their surprise, the manager is Black, and he attempts to use his Blackness to calm down the Evans' while expressing that they are on the same side and that he is doing everything he can to change Borgan's Market as the inside man. All the while, the manager knows that he is feeding his community bad food and is lying to their faces.

Showing an example here, that although you may share the same skin tone, "all skinfolk ain't kinfolk." Popularized by author and folklorist, Zora Neale Hurston, this phrase is simply a creative way of saying that not all people, who share the same racial identity as you are your

family. In other words, there is more to friendship and affinity than mere racial similarity. Often, such as in this case, the phrase is used when other Blacks betray Blacks, and this is an important point of Black unity (or lack thereof) that Patricia Edwards highlights in her story of this episode. Upon exiting the office Florida hears the manager on the phone with Borgan after he believed he foiled the protestors, so Florida concocts a plan for payback. Returning to the manager's office to thank him for his help in being on their side, Florida and James bring him a plate of dinner, the roast that got their family sick. Thankful for the gesture, the manager commences to eat until Florida comments that the friend they brought with them to the office is a representative of the Food Administration. In actuality, he is a friend of the Evans family that agreed to the payback that Florida intended against the manager. When they realize his resistance to eating the meat, the manager is caught in the act of purposely selling bad meat, in front of a man who he assumes to be a Food Administration representative. To save face, he takes a bite of the food, and immediately runs out of the office and to the restroom. Florida and James laugh with one another and embrace in the fact that they foiled the manager. However, Florida still isn't satisfied with the result of their trickery.

Florida: "You know Borgan ain't gonna change nothing because of that don't you?"
James: "Yea I know, but Florida, we got even, just for ONCE, we got even!"

With pride and satisfaction, the couple embraces again about the very rare instance of the poor getting even with those who have continuously taken advantage of them. Knowing that their predicament of access to healthy and fresh foods won't change, Florida finds solace in the small victory that her protest led to. Through instances such as these in her role as Florida, and in real life, Esther Rolle frequently altered the image of Black women's power, agency, and resilience on screen as well as through her dissent off screen with production at Tandem. These

various acts of redeeming the Black image led to Esther Rolle departing from the entire fifth season of *Good Times*, however, she returned for the show's sixth and final season.[338]

Although the previous section focused primarily on the resilience and contention of Esther Rolle as a Black actress navigating her own voice, agency, and power in order to redeem Black characters on screen, she was not alone in that fight at Tandem Productions. Rolle's co-star and on-screen husband, John Amos, also fought with Tandem executives regarding a lack of Black writers and demeaning characterizations in the production of *Good Times*. These acts of contention led to John Amos' demise at Tandem. However, his fight should not go unaddressed as it adds to a larger history of Black artist's resilience in the space of a White-controlled American television industry.

Part 3: "A Disruptive Factor": John Amos vs. Tandem Productions

> "When asked if he felt like he had 'made it' by another press member, Amos said not until he can produce his own pictures and 'do what I want to do in the TV industry.'"[339]

At Tandem Productions, *Good Times* co-star John Amos, who played the strict and hardworking father James Evans, Sr., utilized various tactics to infiltrate the production space. On-screen, as James Sr., Amos had to portray agency and resilience in the face of multiple situations of prejudice and discrimination. In his real life, actor John Amos, had to use his agency to contend with various instances of dissent against Tandem executives in his fight for a more redeeming and positive image of Black people on television.

[338] Marguiles, Lee "Esther Rolle returning to Good Times" *St. Petersburg Times*, 06/10/1978.

[339] Peak, Estyr P. "Actor turned work into 'Good Times' for writer" in *Twin Cities Courier*, 01/31/1975.

Amos became nationally known in his first major TV role, playing weatherman Gordy Howard on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) until 1973. However, less known and important to this discussion, before *Mary Tyler Moore*, Amos worked as a staff writer for variety series *The Leslie Uggams Show* (Sept. 28-Dec. 14th, 1969).[340] With this initial experience as a writer, Amos knew the industrial power that was held in controlling a narrative and imagery that would be put on television. In early 1970s television, to be a writer and to perform was an abstract concept to the producers. In reflection Amos states, "they [Tandem Productions] weren't ready for somebody who thought they could act *and* write. I had to wait until my turn came."[341] Amos felt that his time to write and perform had come with *Good Times*, however, his efforts would face much contention with the executives at Tandem, which ultimately risked his role on the show. In this section I intend to make it clear that through Amos' character portrayal of James Evans on screen, public dissent of Tandem Productions demands, consistent contractual disputes, and writing a critically refocused *Good Times* episode outline, Amos performed multiple forms of protest at Tandem in order to preserve a redeeming (to gain possession of it and compensate for its faulty past) image of the Black community and family on television.

Amos' famed portrayal of James Evans, Sr., the patriarch of the Evans family, was one that television had not yet seen. As *Good Times* chronicled the first Black "nuclear" family on television it also meant the first Black mother *and* father. James Sr. was known for his tough demeanor and his strict approach to raising his children in the rough housing projects that the

[340] The series aired on CBS as part of its 1969 fall lineup and was the second variety series to feature an African American host since *The Nat King Cole Show* (1956-1957).

[341] Adalian, Josef, "John Amos on *Mary Tyler Moore,* Racism on Set, and Playing the First Black Family Man" in *Vulture*, 10/13/2015. http://www.vulture.com/2015/10/john-amos-mary-tyler-moore-good-times.html.

family lived in. Episode after episode James Sr. can be seen walking into his home after working double shifts, yet still barely making it by. Early in the series, the audience can identify the type of man James is. He is hardworking and compassionate, yet strict and protective. Tired and sluggish after an overnight shift at work, his wife Florida comments on how much money he made one evening amidst the family losing money from paying for her recent operation, James laughs his troubles off in a heartwarming yet painful way:

Florida: You worked all night and all they paid you was six dollars?
James: No, they paid me a lot more, but after they got finished taking out the federal withholding, the state withholding, the unemployment compensation, the state disability insurance, and an extra two dollar charge for getting my dishwashing uniform cleaned… you know if I worked for them a few more hours, I'd end up owing them ten bucks.[342]

Though this response is written as comedy, and received much laughter from the studio audience, it points to a larger issue with high taxes having great impact on the earnings of blue-collar workers. James' ability to laugh this off in the state of his family consistently in fear of financial turmoil is in large part why *Good Times* remained successful. At the heart of much of their consistent struggles, was a tight familial unit that yearned to find the positive in situations, using laughter in times of pain. After this scene, Florida embraces James and apologizes for the financial strain that having her operation put on the family, and James forbids her for taking any blame. James' role and demeanor, in this episode as well as throughout the series, is that of a protector and provider while Florida is the nurturer and guardian of the hearth, normalizing traditional gender roles that all audiences can relate to. The connection between John Amos and Esther Rolle on screen as James and Florida Evans is a partnership integral to the success of the show that the two colleagues established before the series began.

[342] *Good Times* Season 1 Episode 3 "Getting Up the Rent," 02/22/1974.

Upon being offered the role as James Evans on *Good Times*, Amos was well aware that this series would in fact be Esther Rolle's show. Although Rolle and Amos were both such hits on *Maude* (1972-1978) as Maude's maid Florida and her husband, the performance of Rolle is what garnered spinoff appeal.[343] In an Emmy TV Legends interview with Amos, he even states that in his initial meeting with Norman Lear, that it was made clear that he would be "reading with Miss Rolle, it'll be her show."[344] Through this same interview Amos speaks of Rolle in such high esteem and what they wanted out of this show was a husband and a wife as to not perpetuate the matriarchal family. They were well aware of the stakes that their roles in this show had on Black communities, and they took it as their collective duty to honor these roles.[345] They believed it to be their duty to stick together and make sure that what they felt about the characters, and their integrity as a family, became a bond between the two of them.[346] With this role, Amos, and the rest of the cast, were under the leadership of Rolle and her larger vision to redeem the Black image on screen.

The First Black Father of a Complete Family

In addition to the documented contention of Amos with Tandem, Amos' character portrayal of James Evans on screen worked to establish Amos (off screen and on screen) as a cata-

[343] Lucas Bob. "A 'Salt Pork and Collard Greens' TV Show" in *Ebony Magazine*. June 1974, p. 50.

[344] "John Amos" *Television Academy Foundation Interview,* 12/02/2014, https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/john-amos#interview-clips.

[345] Ibid.

[346] Adalian, Josef, "John Amos on *Mary Tyler Moore,* Racism on Set, and Playing the First Black Family Man."

lyst for change in the television industry. Through the discussion of Rolle in the previous section, it's clear that the ways in which Amos and Rolle chose to redeem the Black image took different forms. As the first Black father figure of a full family, Amos knew very well what this image meant for American society. In a recent interview with Vulture, Amos reminisces on his time with Tandem on *Good Times*, and when asked about the importance of his role he states:

> "I was carrying the weight of being the first Black father of a complete family, and I carried that responsibility seriously. Maybe too much so. Norman [Lear] thought I was taking on too much of a burden with it. But it was my responsibility. I knew that millions of Black people were watching. I know that my own father was watching. My own children were watching. And I was not going to portray something that was less than redeeming."[347]

Here, Amos sought to use this role as an opportunity to create a larger message to the American viewing body regarding the potential of not only Black performance, but also the message of fatherhood, family, and faith through unfortunate trials that is seen throughout his *Good Times* tenure. In as early as the first episode of the series, it is apparent that the Evans's family attempts to maintain faith in the presence of turmoil. Amos as James Evans, rough around the edges and with a tough love demeanor, stands firmly as the representation of the work, strain, sacrifice, and often disappointment of the uneducated Black male laborer trying to provide for their family. This image was important in this historical moment, as the social understanding of the Black family, as influenced by the Moynihan report, was that it was either matriarchal or otherwise facing destruction.[348]

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[347] Ibid.

[348] Moynihan, Daniel P. "The Moynihan Report (Negro Family: The Case for National Action). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965.

Airing February 8th, 1974, "Too Old Blues," was the first episode of *Good Times* on CBS. This episode is so important to Black protest because it discusses James' bouts with age-ism in a government-funded work space. In the episode, written by a Black television writer, Bob Peete, James is excited because he is sure that he is going to get a high paying union job. The bulk of the show's comedy stems from the one-liners and jabs between the Evans children, especially the ever-goofy J.J (played by Jimmy Walker). Also, often at the center of the comedic flair is Florida's sharp wit towards her children. However, James' character in the show is much more serious, and his comedy is often self-deprecating. Waiting anxiously for the mail to arrive to see his scores on the union aptitude test, James emits a positive outlook on what the Evans family future will look like with this newfound wealth and decides to view the newspaper want-ads for fun.

James: Let's see what the equal opportunity employers have for James Evans this morning. Computer designer. College graduate…hmm ain't that tender, I only missed that one by four years college, four years high school, and two years public school.
Florida: Don't they have anything for mechanics? You're a very handy man James.
James: Now that's it right there Baby, when you're White you're a mechanic, when you're Black you're a handyman.

Through this dialogue in the first episode, James makes it clear that he hadn't made it past a junior high school education level and how that impacts job acquisition. Also, he is aware of the subtle ways that job postings, titles, and descriptions are often raced. These forms of knowledge are learned over time through the strife that working class and low educated individuals are forced to engage with. Often, it's easier to make a joke of or laugh at these disadvantages rather than dwell upon them, using laughter as a defense is consistency practiced by the Evans family. Upon receiving news that he has passed the exam; James is invited to an in-person interview. Full of hope, he tells Florida to throw a party in his honor for the good fortune they are soon to receive. With James soon acquiring this steady job, the family's financial

security and well-being is more intact. Florida even comments to her best friend Willona about the lengths that James, or as she states, "Mr. Breadwinner," had to endure before they reached this milestone.

Florida: When you think of all the things this man has done to keep his family together… dish-washer, laundry helper, night watchman, floor sweeper, and all that was just last week!

The burden of many jobs is one that may resonate with the working-class Black poor, who had to take multiple part-time jobs to supplement income for family and housing. Having one steady job paying $4.25 an hour was a luxury and seeing James as a Black man fight to reach that is part of the thrill in watching *Good Times*. The show habitually displays the family's reliance on hope and faith for the family to get their big break through James. However, after passing the physical and mental test, a government error in recording his age prevents James from eligibility for the job as it is for men ages 18-35, and James is 41. The strength and agency James exudes as he stands up for himself to the job recruiter is a verbal testament to the larger poor communities and people of color being forced to adhere to discriminatory government practices and guidelines, in this case, age.

James: I got a family, they need food on the table, clothes on their backs, I gotta pay rent, I need that job!

In situations like these, James must often go to battle to provide for his family. Despite his proclamation, the recruiter refuses James a job. Aware that he is not going to win this fight James exits lamenting, "I'm a senior citizen that only has to wait 24 more years for his social security." James' age restricts him from a government funded opportunity, whilst prevents him from receiving other aid, putting him in a very precarious situation when it comes to securing employment. Further, this quote fits into the broader context of the show as it explains just one

of the various situations of prejudice that the Evans' are forced to endure throughout the entirety of the series. When he gets home, James is greeted by his family and friends all singing "For he's a jolly good Dude" in his honor. Much to his dismay, he has to admit to his loved ones that his age barred him from getting the job, apologize for crushing their dreams.

Florida quickly nurtures him with support when his ego is damaged, while James consistently attempts to provide for her and the family in this traditional masculine and feminine marital dynamic. Their bond on screen works to show how love and support work in their family, above material means. Florida comforts him by saying, "James you always see this family through, you can do it" and that faith is all he needs to pick himself up. The very next day James starts a new week-long job at a car wash, full of hope and with a smile on his face. Episodes such as these throughout the series point to James's resilience. With consistent drawbacks and missed opportunities, leaning on his wife and family, he is able to muster the courage to keep going. Seeing a Black father on television practice this weekly grit is inspiring to the potential of the working-class Black father. In this role, Amos helped to imagine a father figure that refused to quit amidst a social, cultural, and political system that often made it easy to. However, in order to complete his previous mentioned goal of redeeming the Black image on screen, Amos felt that simply acting the role was not enough, his insertion into all aspects of the production is where he believed the true change could be made.

Avenues of Protest and Dissent

In contrast to its Tandem predecessor, *Sanford and Son*, the concept of *Good Times* was created and written by Black writers, Eric Monte and Mike Evans. After the Evans family story was developed by Norman Lear, it had immense potential to not only for Black representation

on screen, but also as the first network primetime television show crediting Black creators. Unfortunately, although a Black writer, Eric Monte, scripted the original episode, and the following four scripts were by freelance Black writers, the majority of the scripts thereafter were written by White writers, which was objectionable to Amos and Rolle because they believed these writers were disconnected from the show's central issues.[349] This disconnect, they felt, was responsible for the enlarging of their television son J.J.'s more buffoonish role that Amos and Rolle felt detracted from the show's cultural depth for the sake of pure comedy.[350] The role of J.J., which was at first used as comic relief to soften the blow of the family's hardships, soon shifted to a characterization that disrupted the original political agenda the show first set forth. In the first few episodes written by Black writers, the series initially addressed realistic issues and topics pertaining to Black poor communities. Topics such as discriminatory age restrictions in the work force, relying on religious faith to get through harsh times, threat of eviction, con artists using religion for financial gain, and protesting the White-washing of American history taught in school, to name a few.[351] Christine Acham, helps to understand these changes in scripts and content once White writers shifted the roles and characterizations of the Evans family. Acham describes "three types of episodes that arose from these internal conflicts and became evident in viewing the series: pedagogical, political and 'pure sitcom.'"[352] Like Rolle,

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[349] Acham, Christine. *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 211.

[350] Ibid.

[351] *Good Times* " Too Old Blues" by: Bob Peete 2/8/74
Good Times "Black Jesus" by: Kurt Taylor and John Donley 2/15/1974
Good Times "Getting Up the Rent" by: Eric Monte 2/22/74
Good Times "God's Business is Good Business" by: Roland Wolpert 3/1/74
Good Times "Michael Gets Suspended" by: Eric Monte 3/8/74

[352] Acham, Christine. *Revolution* Televised, p.133.

discussed in the previous section, Amos too reacted more vehemently towards some of the pure sitcoms.

The pedagogical episode described by Acham is one that attempts to teach the audience overtly about a particular issue often containing character monologues on topics like healthcare or education.[353] The political episodes assert themselves through the daily acts of racism and or discrimination that the Evans' face in their community.[354] More important to this discussion are in fact the "pure sitcoms," as Acham terms them, which often steer clear of any political agenda or moral purpose, usually with the character J.J. at the focal point. Although there may be a certain politics to the freedom of Black male expression that is characterized in the episodes that center on J.J.'s performance, much of these episodes soon outnumbered the ones that were blatantly socially and culturally relevant. In some instances, Amos and Rolle were able to use their voices to impact the scripts and direction of the show, however they were given no production credits.[355] When this did not work out, Amos used his absence at Tandem, as well as popular magazines to protest. A large concern of his was that the scripts were putting too much emphasis on J.J. "putting on his chicken hat and saying Dy-No-Mite every third page."[356] Amos felt as though much more emphasis could have been put on the aspirations of the future careers of

[353] Ibid.

[354] Ibid., 135.

[355] Ibid., 132.

[356] "John Amos" *Television Academy Foundation Interview,* 12/02/2014, https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/john-amos#interview-clips.

the other Evans children, Michael and Thelma, instead of drifting into the consistently droll humor of the slacker oldest son J.J. Much of Amos' contention to the direction in which the show was moving showed early signs to him and Tandem parting ways.

Using *Ebony Magazine* in part of Amos' protest, the "Bad Times on the 'Good Times' Set" feature on the actors of *Good Times*, reflects much of the actor's contentions with the start of the third season 1975-1976.[357] While *Good Times* producer Allan Manings denied that the role of J.J. had been expanded for comedic value, he claimed that the next year of the show (season three) and its characters would have more depth.[358] Amos, however, was not very convinced about this claim until he seeing it come to fruition. When it came time to renew contracts for the upcoming season, Amos' contractual dispute with Tandem Productions caused a week delay in the beginning of show tapings for the new season.[359] Through Amos' agents and representation, it is clear that although some of the difficulties involved salary, a source close to the negotiations confided: "There is more than money involved here. It goes back to how Black men have been treated in this country all along."[360] Amos was "very strong in asserting his position, not only for himself but for the whole *Good Times* cast. Black actors and actresses have to go beyond the call of duty."[361] Much like his Tandem predecessor, Redd Foxx of *Sanford and Son*, Amos took a direct call to action towards Tandem, calling for a change in production and direction because the treatment of how the show visualized Black men, specifically J.J.,

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[357] Robinson, Louie. "Bad Times on the 'Good Times' Set" in *Ebony Magazine* Sept. 1975.

[358] Ibid., 40.

[359] Ibid.

[360] Ibid.

[361] Ibid.

was a disservice. Amos makes it evident that Black actors and actresses had to go above and beyond simply their acting duty for changes to occur and uses the restructuring of his contract to commence the changes he wished to see.

In order to have an established structure to infiltrate production credits, Amos established his own production company.[362] Through the establishment of his own production company, John Amos Productions, Inc., Amos put into motion a business model that would allow him to be credited for productions and future artistic ventures within and outside of Tandem Productions. After holding out on renewing his season three contract, through his production company and legal team, Amos drafted a new contract for Tandem to consider. In an interoffice communication letter from Tandem Productions' Vice President Alan Horn to founder Norman Lear and *Good Times* producer Allan Manings, Horn explains "the recent amendment to John Amos' contract incorporates several stipulations concerning Mr. Amos' writing services."[363] These new contract stipulations on writing services and Amos' right to script consultation were redlined for Tandem to consider, they are listed at length as such:

3. Producer (Tandem Productions, Inc.) hereby guarantees that it will engage Company to furnish to Producer the services of Performer (John Amos) to write one (1) script for the series during the Third and each succeeding Contract Year for which Producer exercises its option to imply Performer hereunder.

4. At Performer's request the individual producer or executive producer of the series shall consult with Performer at mutually convenient times with respect to the script delivered to Performer for each program of the series. In the event of any disagreement between Performer and the individual producer or executive producer of the series with regard to the content of any such script, the decision of said producer or executive producer shall be controlling. Producer's failure to consult with Performer as to the script for any program shall not constitute a material breach by Producer of the Employment Agreement.

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[362] Interoffice Communications and Contracts began to reference "John Amos Productions" in 1975 correspondence. Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box "Correspondence-Good Times," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*.

[363] Letter received on July 28th, 1975. Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box "Correspondence-Good Times," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*.

5. (a) At any time hereafter, Company (John Amos Productions, Inc.) may submit to Norman Lear for approval original ideas for one or more new television series. Lear shall respond to such submission within thirty (30) days.

(b) In the event that Lear approves in writing an idea submitted to him pursuant to subparagraph (a) hereof, then with respect to such idea Company may draw upon the Development Fund in such amount as it deems advisable to a maximum of Ten Thousand Dollars ($10,000) for the purpose of developing said idea into an acceptable pilot script for a television series project.[364]

These three contract amendments truly represented transformative employment arrangements for Black performers. Amos outlines his own terms and demands (in writing) the opportunity to have agency in developing the characterization of his role at Tandem Productions. The effects of this change extend beyond Tandem and are relevant to television at large. No other contract of *Good Times'* actors had such clauses written into them. Through Amos' contract holdout and amendments made through his employment agreement, he set the terms for the ways in which he sought best to utilize his position in/on television. Although Redd Foxx of *Sanford and Son* voiced similar concerns, the result was a court settlement (as mentioned in Chapter 2) that was largely financial, resulting in Foxx receiving $25,000 per-episode, plus 25% of the producers' net profits.[365] Through John Amos Productions, Amos drafted the opportunity for writing and production credit into his contract. With section 3, Amos calls for the ability to have at least one writing credit each contracted season. This amendment proves to be of grave importance to the Black sitcoms of Tandem that have been criticized when the majority of episodes by White writers have been accused of being disconnected from the Black cultural issues at hand. The inclusion of a writing credit, even one, offers the ability of Amos to

[364] Contract written on July 10th, 1975. Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box "Correspondence-Good Times," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*.

[365] Turteltaub, Saul (Co-Executive Producer on *Sanford and Son*) interview with Adrien Sebro. May 30th, 2018.

reclaim the relevancy at the core of *Good Times* for himself and his fellow actors. In turn, giving Black performers the ability to speak for themselves through scripts. With regards to section 4, through mandating script consultation, Amos has the ability to comment on the language, structure, authenticity, and impact that the proposed script may have on the depiction of the Black community via the Evans family. Although the final say is given to the producer, making this assertion contractually proves the efforts Amos felt necessary to infiltrate production and be involved in the full process from writing to taping and airing. Finally, in section 5, through the establishment of Amos' own production company, he feels he is actually able to "do what he wants in the television industry," as said in introductory quote of this section.[366] As an independent company, Amos strategically writes into his employment agreement, that his position as a performer and company owner are a package deal. Given an idea for a profitable television series, Tandem Productions was required to fund its initial development. Tandem soon signed and agreed to Amos' demands, and through these forms of protest and calls for change written into his contract, Amos established himself as actor, writer, and producer to Tandem executives.

With the help of co-star Ja'Net DuBois, Amos soon used his contractual agreement in section 3 to write a *Good Times* story outline to Tandem with hopes for it to be written and produced. The potential of this written episode is important to the discussion of dissent because these two actors felt that their words better suited the perspectives previously written by *Good Time's* White writers. The writing of the episode is proof of the resilience that Amos had to muster in a space where he felt his voice wasn't being heard. On January 27th, 1975, Amos and

[366] Peak, Estyr P. "Actor turned work into 'Good Times' for writer" in *Twin Cities Courier*, January 31st, 1975.

DuBois wrote an outline for a prospective *Good Times* episode entitled, "It's a Family Affair."[367] Although the episode was not received until December 15th, 1975, Tandem Vice President Alan Horn makes it clear to *Good Times* producer Allan Manings that the outline should be treated as a priority and given close consideration with regards to Amos' contract stipulations.[368] In summary, the story outline takes place amidst a dispute between Florida and her best friend and neighbor Willona, leaving the Evans family in disarray. James is forced to be the mediator between the two, and once together they realize that they actually have no reason to be fighting. During this joyous reunion, Willona's house is robbed, forcing her to move into the Evans household until the locks on her doors are fixed. From taking too long in the restroom, having all of her phone calls forwarded to their home, turning the channels without notice, etc. Willona is steadily becoming an unwelcome guest in Florida's eyes. With Willona doing the laundry and cooking dinner, Florida feels her maternal duties are being taken over and soon decides that Willona has to go back to her own home. The story concludes when Florida forces James to fix Willona's broken door and they find that Willona was already in the process of fixing it. They both felt their friendship slipping away with their constant presence in each other's space. Although this story outline is mainly "pure sitcom," as it tells a funny story about friendship and familial roles, it does not feel frivolous nor does it overextend the same jokes of previous episodes. Also, it utilizes J.J. for small bits of comic relief rather than overshadowing his character at the expense of others, an issue that even Norman Lear reflects as a problem with many episodes of this time. "We allowed him (J.J.), for the sake of getting those easy

[367] "It's a Family Affair" Story Outline written by John Amos and Ja'net DuBois 1/27/75, Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box "Correspondence-Good Times," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions.*

[368] Interoffice Communication Letter 12/15/75. Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box "Correspondence-Good Times," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*.

laughs, to repeat himself too much."[369] So, although not political or particularly pedagogical in its content, the proposed story outline had a two-fold potential. First, the story carefully handled a change in content structure whilst continuing to keep the relevancy of each character to the narrative. Also, and finally, it had the potential of bringing more Black writers to the show's production credits at Tandem and displaying the various talents of Black artists as a whole in television. Unfortunately, this episode was never produced nor written into a script, as Amos' combined forms of protest at Tandem led to his release from *Good Times*.

"Damn, Damn, DAMN!"

Continuing his dispute with the show's content and direction, Amos made his stance verbally known to Tandem executives. Upon the start of the third season Amos was informed that he would not be in the show taping on September 18th, 1975 (season 3 episode 7 "The Baby"), so he could have an extra week off after the show's season hiatus.[370] After he refused to be present for the table reading for the following episode the next day, Amos was formally suspended from the September 25th episode taping (season 3 episode 8 "Michael's Big Fall") for violating contractual obligations requiring him to be present at all table reads and rehearsals.[371] The last presence of John Amos as James Evans, Sr. was in the season three finale, "The Rent Party." During the hiatus before the start of the fourth season, Amos reflects on a phone call he received from Norman Lear regarding Amos' future at Tandem and with *Good Times*.

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[369] "Norman Lear" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*, 02/26/1998. https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/norman-lear#interview-clips.

[370] Interoffice Communication Re: John Amos Suspension 9/23/75. Norman Lear TV Shows/Production Box "Correspondence-Good Times," *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*

[371] Ibid.

Amos recalls picking up the phone to talk to Lear and Lear sharing the news, "We got renewed for another season…but you won't be with us."[372] Amos responded, "It's your show, have a good life" and hung up the phone.[373] Discussing the circumstances around his firing, Amos admits, partly in jest, that he "wasn't the most diplomatic guy in those days and that they (Tandem) got tired of having their lives threatened over some jokes on the script, so they killed me off."[374] After Lear continued to deem Amos as a "disruptive factor," Amos reflects that the experience taught him the lesson that he wasn't as important as he thought he was to the show and Norman Lear's plans.[375]

In the start of the fourth season, the *Good Times* narrative continues under the pretense that James is in Mississippi and is planning to move the family out there because of a great job opportunity. However, the next day the family receives a telegram that James had died in a car accident—effectively killing off the character James Evans from the show. In what is often regarded as one of the most touching scenes in TV sitcom history, upon digesting the news of his death, Florida Evans shouts, "Damn, Damn, DAMN!," breaking down in tears over the loss of her husband.[376] The closing credits then appear, in silence rather than with the usual applause.[377] Without Amos, the show continued for three more seasons but was never quite the same. J.J.'s character was heightened even more, and the show's political and pedagogical

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[372] Amos, John. *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*, 12/02/2014. https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/john-amos#interview-clips

[373] Ibid.

[374] Ibid.

[375] Ibid.

[376] Hill, James "The Breakdown: Good Times-"Damn, Damn, Damn!" *TV One*, 04/07/2016 https://tvone.tv/31287/the-breakdown-good-times-damn-damn-damn/

[377] *Good Times* Season 4 Episode 2 "The Big Move: Part 2" 09/29/1976.

roots became more veiled through consistent pure sitcoms, eventually leading to a season-long departure of Esther Rolle in season 5, leaving Jimmy Walker as J.J. as the show's star.

Although Amos and Lear mended their relationship 20 years later through the *All in the Family* spinoff *704 Hauser Street* (April 11th-May 9th, 1994), which Lear created and Amos starred in, the show lasted a mere six episodes, failing miserably in comparison to Amos' *Good Times* role. Albeit, risking his tenure with a groundbreaking sitcom, the efforts of John Amos prove to be a radical shift in television history that is rarely discussed. The push to hold executives accountable to the images and the narratives on screen, fighting for his space in the writer's room, and taking a stand for redeeming Black images, are important examples of opposition that John Amos held against Tandem Productions and are integral to understanding Tandem's history of Black sitcom production.

Although employment was lost, the dissent at Tandem in regard to *Good Times*, was productive in terms producing change in representation, however, the dissent did not cease with the actors. As stated earlier in, Eric Monte (the Co-creator of *Good Times*) faced his own battles with keeping a seat at the production table, a battle that soon had legal ramifications. In an interview with NPR in 2006 Monte reflects on his consistent discontent with Norman Lear, ABC, and CBS.[378] Sharing Esther Rolle and John Amos' continuing, even mounting, concern with the scriptwriting, Monte noticed that he was consistently demoted, while the White writers were promoted, because Monte sided with the actors. Monte even states that while in the writing room, "the one note I (Monte) got every meeting without fail, was 'you've got to get rid of the father. A strong Black man in a sitcom doesn't work."[379] Admittingly, there are limits to

[378] Dunn, Katia. "For Classic TV Producer, Good Times No Longer" *NPR Media* 07/29/06.

[379] Ibid.

this quote as Amos had a contract. Though it may be what Monte remembers some time later, what is of more importance here is that from Monte's perspective, the strength in the image of Black fatherhood wasn't supported by his White colleagues at Tandem. A year after Monte re-signed to work on the box office hit film inspired by his real life, *Cooley High* (1975), Tandem did just that and got rid of John Amos as the father James Evans.[380]

Through the interview it becomes clear that Monte's impact on Tandem was much more expansive than the co-creation of *Good Times*. In addition to *Good Times*, Monte claims that he is the individual who found Redd Foxx and convinced Lear to cast Foxx as Fred Sanford in *Sanford and Son*.[381] Also, Monte claims to be responsible for pitching the idea to Lear that an entrepreneurial Black man, named George Jefferson, should be added to the *All in the Family* cast, subsequently George and Louise Jefferson later appeared on *All in the Family*.[382] Other than the firing of John Amos, while Monte was on leave, Lear developed a show starring George and Louise Jefferson that was a spinoff of *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). Norman Lear took all the credit and billed himself as the creator of the show. Outraged at the actions that took place and the lack of recognition Monte received for his work, in 1977 Monte successfully sued ABC, CBS, and Norman Lear for using his ideas in these sitcoms without giving him his credit.[383] Calling Lear a "racist, a hypocrite, thief, and a liar," Monte

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[380] *Cooley High* is a 1975 American coming-of-age/drama film that follows the narrative of high school seniors and best friends, Leroy "Preach" Jackson (Glynn Turman) and Richard "Cochise" Morris (Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs). Written by Eric Monte, directed by Michael Schultz and produced by American International Pictures (AIP), the film, primarily shot in Chicago, Illinois, was a major hit at the box offices, grossing over $13,000,000. The light-hearted turned tragic storyline captivated viewers with its comedic portrayal of carefree best friends, and its soundtrack featured many Motown hits.

[381] Walker, Clarence. "Screenwriter Eric Monte fought Hollywood" *New Blaze* 02/28/18.

[382] Ibid.

[383] Dunn, Katia. "For Classic TV Producer, Good Times No Longer"

sued the parties for $185 million.[384] However, due to Monte's lack of business knowledge and legal representation he only received a $1 million settlement, one percent ownership of *Good Times*, and no royalties for the other show ideas that he created.[385] It can be argued that the decision to settle out of court proves that Monte's claims have legitimacy, however, his "successful" lawsuit was actually a loss in comparison to the larger revenue that these shows brought to television over time.

Unfortunately, the worst was yet to come for Eric Monte. As soon as he filed the lawsuit against Lear and company, all of his writing offers dried up. Monte stated that, "nobody in Hollywood would talk to me, I was blacklisted."[386] It was the beginning of the end of his career as Hollywood marked him as a scriptwriter who was "difficult to work with."[387] When NPR asked Norman Lear to comment on these claims, he declined.[388] Over the next 30 years of his life, Eric Monte blew much of his money on an unsuccessful stage production and drifted in and out of the homes of family and friends, eventually developing a drinking and cocaine habit.[389] The blacklist that he was put on for calling out those in power led to Monte losing everything. As of 2018, Monte is living in a shelter and still writing, hoping for his next big break.[390] Monte's story demonstrates the stakes these actors, writers, and producers faced when challenging the White television executives. When Monte took agency to fight for what he was

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[384] Walker, Clarence. "Screenwriter Eric Monte fought Hollywood" *New Blaze* 02/28/18.

[385] Dunn, Katia. "For Classic TV Producer, Good Times No Longer"

[386] Ibid.

[387] Ibid.

[388] Ibid.

[389] Ibid.

[390] Ibid.

owed through his creations, his life came crashing in. With his claims of various creative rights, Monte is in fact a creative mind within every Black sitcom produced at Tandem, however his name is consistently written out of the histories of the impact that these Tandem sitcoms had on society at large. Of Monte's claims to greatness, Monte's creation of George Jefferson, as the Black counterpart and alternative to Archie Bunker on *All in the Family* may be his best. George Jefferson is truly a character never before seen on television. His creation of a character so unapologetic about Black ascension was so attractive that it spawned its own show, *The Jeffersons*.

Chapter 4: *The Jeffersons*

Part 1: *"Movin' On Up?"* A New Take on the Black Bourgeoisie

Well we're movin on up,
To the east side.
To a deluxe apartment in the sky.
Movin on up
To the east side.
We finally got a piece of the pie.
Fish don't fry in the kitchen;
Beans don't burn on the grill.
Took a whole lotta tryin'
Just to get up that hill.
Now we're up in the big leagues
Gettin' our turn at bat.
As long as we live, it's you and me baby
There ain't nothin wrong with that.
Well we're movin on up,
To the east side.
To a deluxe apartment in the sky.
Movin on up
To the east side.
We finally got a piece of the pie.[391]

In this chapter, I will address the cultural significance of *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985) through the topics of economic displacement, the impact of Isabel Sanford, and the show's themes of interracial conflict. Due to their race and financial ascension, the Jefferson family was consistently in a space of precarity regarding fitting into their new community of financial elite on-screen. Behind the scenes, Isabel Sanford was able to further impact the agency of Black women in television, strengthening the roles of other Black women on the show. Also, both behind the scenes and on-screen, *The Jeffersons* dealt with the varying responses to their portrayal of interracial marriage. This chapter contributes to the overarching argument of the dissertation as it traces the racial development of Black families in Tandem shows and how the

[391] *The Jeffersons* Theme Song/Opening credits, Songwriters: Ja'Net DuBois and Jeff Barry, Performed by: Ja'Net DuBois "Movin' On Up" Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, 1975.

Black artists of these shows had to practice resilience in their efforts of infiltrating the television landscape to tell authentic Black stories. In sum, I will discuss the ways in which *The Jeffersons* and its cast's comedic portrayal of the American Dream of Black financial ascension, amidst the reality of the confines of discrimination, offered a new vision of Blackness on screen. Popular reception of *The Jeffersons* addresses the show's focus on Black wealth and, primarily as you will read in Part 3, the show's interracial elements, which were the major issue that produced public response.

As noted in the conclusion of Chapter 3, the claims to authorship of The Jeffersons have been historically complicated between Eric Monte and Norman Lear. In an interview Norman Lear comments on the creation and legacy of his 1975 hit CBS Black sitcom, *The Jeffersons*, claiming that "after a year and a half of *Good Times*, we [Tandem Productions] began to read, 'why are they [Black characters in these shows] all working 2-3 jobs, why can't they be fairly affluent, why can't there be another slice of Black life?'"[392] When asked if these concerns were valid, Lear commented that he doesn't necessarily believe they were valid for Tandem, but it was valid for television generally.[393] Lear claims that through this general concern and media "spanking," he decided that his company should create a show about an upwardly mobile Black family, an idea that came to fruition in *The Jeffersons*.[394] Bud Yorkin, before he was bought out of his interest in Tandem by company president Jerry Perenchio, gave a significant comment on the company's intent in making *The Jeffersons*: Lear, he said, "had the idea of putting a Black

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[392] "Norman Lear" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews,* 02/26/1998. https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/norman-lear

[393] Ibid.

[394] Ibid.

man in a White man's world."[395] Note that Yorkin does not say they are putting "a poor man into a rich world." Instead his phrasing suggests a certain conflation and slippage: to Tandem's head, it seems, poor *is* Black and rich *is* White. Yorkin's racialized (and gendered) phrasing makes it clear that although upward mobility is a focus, Blackness and masculinity were central selling points for *The Jeffersons*. The show worked to tell the story of Black class mobility, making the phrase "movin' on up," internationally known.

"Movin on up" is the tune that rings loudly throughout the introductory theme song of *The Jeffersons*. To "move up" inherently means to succeed at whatever you are trying to pursue, usually referring to making more money, getting a great job, or simply doing better. "Movin on up," in the case of *The Jeffersons*, also meant moving spatially (into a tower) and into a fundamentally White world. *The Jeffersons* challenges the promotion of upward mobility on television through the comedic "fish out of water" insertion of Black characters into the upper middle class, a space on television previously exclusive to White communities.[396] I use the term "upper middle class" because there is a clear distinction of the Jefferson family's social class in comparison to the working class identification of the characters in *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times*. In Elizabeth Higginbotham's *Too Much to Ask*, she cites various definitions of how class has historically been discussed. I align my definition with her claim that,

> "members of the middle class are involved in the accumulating capital by designing and controlling the work of others, even though they themselves receive wages and/or salaries. In contrast, members of the

[395] Yorkin wanted to be bought out so that he can solely focus on making films.
"Bud Yorkin" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*, 12/02/1997. https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/bud-yorkin#about

[396] Here, I am defining upward mobility as the capacity or facility for rising to a higher social or economic position.

working class execute tasks designed by others and in many aspects have lost control over the work process. They are more likely to lack power in the workplace and be supervised by others, often doing work defined by members of the middle class.[397]

Because George Jefferson runs a chain of successful dry-cleaning stores, he is responsible for the managerial work of others while gaining a controlling salary. I see his class status as "upper" because not only is he responsible for the managerial work, he actually owns these stores, that ownership of a successful business franchise helps him to transcend from simply being middle class. The definition used to describe the working class is clear for the predicament of the Evans family in *Good Times,* however, it is complicated when used to describe the Sanford's in *Sanford and Son*. As previously discussed, Fred and Lamont Sanford own and operate their own business, however their financial predicament does not allow them the designation of middle-class status. They have no employees working for them, so they must do the managerial and day to day labor to run their business and in their failing business market of junk and antiquities, they lack the financial capital to ever get ahead.

On the one hand, *The Jeffersons* challenges the historical Whiteness of upper middle-class space on the one hand. But on the other, although they are financially well off, compared to Tandem's other Black families, the Jefferson's Blackness and humble beginnings consistently required them to engage in alternative forms of hustle economics.[398] Since these forms of

[397] Higginbotham, Elizabeth. *Too Much to Ask: Black Women in the Era of Integration*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001, p. 23.

[398] In these televisual representations, the characters must resort to racialized informal networks and economies that I call "hustle economics," which include but are not limited to: under-the-table deals, lying, gambling, blackmail, favors, etc. These methods are specific to the Black culture and community and are integral to make ends meet, serving as critical counterparts to the modes of economic stability that White communities and families have access to on American television. Representing Black people resorting to and practicing these informal economies faces the potential problem of reinforcing popular negative representations of Black life; however Black "hustle economies" are represented, if comedically, as a matter of survival and a demonstration of resilience. Even when these modes of economic security or advancement fail, these Black characters demonstrate the capacity to recover quickly from these difficulties, a toughness necessary for them to keep their heads above water and try again.

hustle are different from those on *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times*, to use the same phrase would not work in the case of *The Jeffersons*. Instead, I believe that the Jefferson family contends with an "economics of displacement," a term I am using to define the particular economic situation that the Jeffersons face as they are nouveau riche and the access that this label allows. *The Jeffersons* constitutes a new category for the American sitcom of the 1970s, one defined by Blackness *and* wealth. This status often leaves the characters in precarious situations. Each week the show gathered more than 30% of the national TV audience. And through viewing the daily situations of the Jefferson family on screen, many Americans were led to believe that Black communities are often required to use various methods to stay financially afloat.[399] According to Herman Gray in *Watching* Race, series like *The Jeffersons* fall into the category of "Separate but Equal," discourse, "where Black characters live and work in hermetically sealed social milieus that are approximately equivalent to their White counterparts."[400] However, *The Jeffersons* complicates Gray's claim because although the show features a Black family's home at its center, the Black characters here interact with and contest with the cast of White characters daily.

Although *The Jeffersons* received generally high Nielsen ratings, Norman Lear faced continuing backlash from social groups in response to this show. This forced Lear to hire a full-time assistant whose key role was to negotiate with pressure groups.[401] In one instance, Lear

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[399] Robinson, Louie. "The Jeffersons: A look at life on Black America's New Striver's Row" *Ebony Magazine*, January 1976. p. 112.

[400] Gray, Herman. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness."* University of Minnesota Press, 1995. Also see Haggins, Bambi. *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America.* Rutgers University Press, 2007. p. 8.

[401] *Newsweek* June 2nd, 1975, p.79.

purchased three scripts written by CORE-approved writers because CORE believed Lear was stereotyping "Black matriarchs and emasculating their husbands."[402] Amidst these various pressures, came a show that flipped the script on the ways in which Black people had been visualized and spoken for on television. Because of who they are, and where they came from, the Jeffersons could never feel like they fully belonged in the Upper Eastside of Manhattan. The past pulled on them, and although neither ever *fully* forgot where they came from, the longer George, Louise, and Lionel stayed away from the old neighborhood, the less they knew of their old selves. However, reminders of where they came from consistently appeared in different forms. Because there is very little critical, academic discussion of *The Jeffersons*, this chapter attempts to map the ground of the series through textual analyses of episodes, interviews from actors and producers, trade journal and magazine coverage, and production notes of *The Jeffersons*.[403]

As the introductory theme song suggests, through its upbeat tempo and lyrics, *The Jeffersons* is meant to portray a success story of a working-class family "moving up" and finally grasping the American dream. "Movin' on up" also meant moving away from what you know.

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[402] *Newsweek* June 2nd, 1975, p.79. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) is an African-American civil rights organization in the United States that played a pivotal role for African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement.

[403] Existing sources of academic discussion; Woolfork, Lisa, "Looking for Lionel: Making Whiteness and Blackness in *All in The Family* and *The Jeffersons"* in *African Americans on Television Race-ing for Ratings.* Eds. David J. Leonard and Lisa A. Guerrero. Praeger: 2013, pp. 45-68.

Rhym, Darren, "An Analysis of George Jefferson and Heathcliff Huxtable" in *Journal of African American Men*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Winter 1998), pp. 57-67.

Berry, Gordon L., "Black Family Life on Television and the Socialization of African American Child: Images of Marginality" in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Flight. 29, No. 2, Comparative Perspectives on Black Family Life: Vol. II (Summer 1998), pp. 233-242.

During the opening credits (played along with the theme song), every week the audience is re-introduced to the plot of the show as they see the image of Louise Jefferson (Isabel Sanford) wiping away her tears in fear of the change that is to come with their new found wealth, while George Jefferson (Sherman Hemsley) grips her hand in support and in contrast wears a large grin, excited about leaving his past behind. The audience follows the car as George and Louise leave the old neighborhood for the new, crossing over from Queens into Manhattan, and following the couple as they walk into their new high rise building while the camera tilts and liter ally moves up in accordance to their new "deluxe apartment in the sky."




SHERMAN HEMSLEY







Figures 13-17 *The Jeffersons* "Movin On Up!"

The family consisted of the arrogant patriarch, and main source of comedic relief, George Jefferson, the kind-hearted, yet stern matriarch Louise "Weezy" Jefferson, and their son Lionel Jefferson (*Good Times* Co-creator Mike Evans, [Season 1, 6-11] and Damon Evans

[Season 2-4]). Also, the main cast features neighbors, Helen (Roxie Roker), Tom (Franklin Cover), and Jenny Willis (Berlinda Tolbert) the Jefferson's interracially married friends and their daughter, and Harry Bentley (Paul Benedict), the British U.N. translator. As a Black viewer of this show it is hard to imagine not feeling a sense of pride and engagement in watching this sitcom. Evidenced through Robin Means Coleman's work on Black viewers and their responses to Black sitcoms, her respondents often read *The Jeffersons* as "positive" because "it assigns a higher class status, and in turn elevates the race, which is often seen as not self-sufficient, or failing to be economically contributory to society."[404] As the first sitcom showing a firmly upper middle class Black family, the show's characters, as indicated through the theme song's lyrics, "took a whole lotta tryin', just to get up that hill, now we're up in the big leagues, gettin' our turn at bat." Black audiences by extension could feel that they too, were in the big leagues—and finally on the same playing field with Whites, at least in the realm of sitcoms.

To be clear, I am not at all claiming that given *The Jeffersons'* focus on an upper middle-class family makes it any better or worse (in terms of quality) than its predecessors *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times.* However, it is evident that through the subjects it addressed, *The Jeffersons* entered a terrain never before traveled on television, and that in itself is a transformative act. The Costume Designer at Tandem, Rita Riggs, states that in working on *The Jeffersons* she had the ability to "show exactly what was happening in America—Blacks were beginning

[404] Coleman, Robin Means. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*. Garland Publishing, 1998. p.166.

to work and were becoming a force in the economy."[405] Her comment makes evident that costuming *The Jeffersons* was visualizing Black ascension. With *The Jeffersons*, Riggs was able to style the image of Black "success," much different than the Black sitcoms prior in which she often costumed degradation and struggle. Riggs also comments that the atmosphere of *The Jeffersons* was "always funny, and very civilized," in contrast to her comments regarding the often more rebellious and resistant cast members in *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times*.[406] It seems as though the respectability of the subject matter on *The Jeffersons* created less production resistance from this particular cast in relation to the other casts.

As Lear found Hemsley during his stint on the all-Black Broadway play *Purlie*, Hemsley came from a space in which Black writers, directors, and actors had the authority in artistic content. When Lear casted Hemsley to play the reoccurring role of George Jefferson on *All in the Family*, Hemsley was introduced to a system of production vastly different from his theatre role. *All in the Family* had no Black writers and its spinoff, *The Jeffersons*, also had no Black writers or producers until the end of the second season, and even then, the Black presence behind the scenes was sparse.[407] In an interview with the Television Academy, when asked if he participated in the writing at all, Sherman Hemsley commented, "No…every once

[405] "Rita Riggs" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews,* 2003. https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/rita-riggs

[406] Ibid.

[407] Other than Eric Monte's creative dispute over the creation of George Jefferson, as discussed at the end of the previous chapter, there existed no Black presence in *The Jeffersons'* production until Season 2 Episode 22 "Lionel's Problem" (02/22/1976) with story credit given to Mia Abbott (Norman Lear's adopted Black daughter).

in a while, I would come up with a funny joke. We all would take chances at rehearsal by saying something that wasn't written, and if it was funny, it would make it."[408] Through this statement, coupled with producer George Sunga's 2008 comment that "the diversity behind the camera was nothing to talk about, we should've done better," it is clear that the lack of Blackness in the production of this show made the Black actor's performances (rather than scripted dialogue) fully responsible in portraying this nouveau riche Black image to television.[409] As the second longest running Black sitcom in history, *The Jeffersons* stands as the first sitcom centered on a Black familial experience of financial upward mobility.[410]

With the premiere of *The Jeffersons* in 1975, it is crucial to note how various trade journals and magazines chose to discuss the show. For instance, *TV Guide*, which provides television program listings information, television-related news, and interviews, is written mostly from a White perspective, catered towards all audiences, and lacks much critical depth in its interviews. In this regard, *TV Guide's* initial coverage of *The Jeffersons* was much more conservative than the Black press as it dealt with Sherman Hemsley's poor upbringing in Philadelphia whilst highlighting the popular understanding that because of his aversion towards White people, that "George Jefferson, is the Black equivalent of Archie Bunker."[411] This understanding occludes the act that George's Blackness in fact contrasts with the inherent societal acceptance and racial hegemony that Archie Bunker is born with through his Whiteness. To see

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[408] "Sherman Hemsley" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*, 2003. https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/sherman-hemsley

[409] "George Sunga" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*, 02/01/2008. https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/george-sunga#interview-clips

[410] *The Jeffersons* was surpassed in 2012 by *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* (2007-2012) by one episode, though *The Jeffersons* ran for more seasons.

[411] Hobson, Dick. "Up From the Ghetto" in *TV Guide* June 21st-27th, 1975. p.21

these two as equivalent is an overly simplistic racial logic that ignores the history of oppression against Black people that might've produced George's anti-White sentiments, while Archie's racism is a tool of oppression rather than a reaction to it. In contrast to *TV Guide*, looking at Black media's coverage of *The Jeffersons* offers a more personal account to the pride that the Black community felt about this show's portrait of a wealthy Black family.

It is important to take a more thorough analysis of *The Jeffersons'* reception from a Black press source as it will illuminate the ways in which Black audiences and critics specifically discuss the sitcom and its cultural impact. *Jet*, a magazine marketed to Black readers, described *The Jeffersons* as the hottest new TV family.[412] In discussion of the show's plot, *Jet* interviews two Black women in media on their perspective. Gloria Vinson and Patricia Edwards, two Black women who worked in production for various shows at Tandem, felt as though *The Jeffersons* was a show that was needed in further representing the race holistically. They commented that, "none of these shows [Black sitcoms] represents in themselves, the total Black perspective, but they do represent aspects and facets of reality."[413] It's clear that regardless of the source of reception, *The Jefferson's* focus on Black financial ascension helps to offer a diversity of the Black image on television, countering the often monolithic portrayal of the Black community.

In an article about *The Jeffersons* from *Jet's* sister magazine, *Ebony*, the reception of the sitcom is not as favorable. Here, Louie Robinson describes the character of George Jefferson as

[412] Johnson, Robert E. "The Jeffersons: Hottest New TV Family" *Jet Magazine,* 03/27/1975.

[413] Ibid., 60.

"loud and aggressive, and if there ever was a vexation to the spirit, he is it."[414] In response, Sherman Hemsley states that the character he plays is simply "scared" and that "he uses his boastfulness to cover up a lot of things."[415] Although this article offers an important interiority to the mind of its main character and his insecurities in his new space of wealth, Robinson labels *The Jeffersons* as a show without social significance.

> "For those who may still be looking for deep and satisfying social significance in Black shows on television, the wait goes on. Although *The Jeffersons* portrays Blacks on a different socioeconomic level than other Black TV shows, it is nevertheless, like the others, broad comedy and has to be accepted as such. But this is true, in one form or another, for most White shows, and thus TV must be realized, if not accepted, for what it is."[416]

Given the sitcom's particular focus of the struggles inherent in Black upward mobility, namely fear about acceptance into a historically White cultural setting, to say that it lacks a social significance completely misreads the critical conversations and themes that exist throughout *The Jeffersons*. Further, in response to the above quote, what is so fascinating about the Jefferson family and their ascension to the upper middle class are the various changes it creates in their social lives. This new wealth requires the Jeffersons to emulate the lifestyle of the financial elite. The dramatic shift in culture from the Jefferson's once working-class beginnings, is often at the center of episodic conflict throughout the sitcom's tenure. The new financial capital held by the family changed their cultural capital from proletariat to a pseudo-bourgeoisie identity. I use the term "pseudo-" to describe the ways in which the bourgeoisie identity is acted, faked,

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[414] Robinson, Louie. "The Jeffersons: A look at life on Black America's New Striver's Row" *Ebony Magazine*, January, 1976. p. 112.

[415] Ibid., 114.

[416] Ibid., 115.

and mimicked by George Jefferson. This identity takes a particular form when describing members of the Black community.

Although written in 1957, Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* chronicles this often complicated financial, social, and cultural shift made by these new, well-off Black people living in the Upper Eastside of Manhattan on *The Jeffersons*.[417] Written almost twenty years prior to the appearance of George Jefferson on screen, Frazier's study is the first to explore this group. Frazier's analysis focuses on two basic points: first, the economic condition and social status of the Black bourgeoisie in the United States, and second, the standards of behavior and values of the "isolated social world" of this group, "which has come into existence as a consequence of racial discrimination and racial segregation."[418] This group came into existence out of racism through its precarious place of being Black and wealthy. The Black bourgeoisie lacks a cultural and racial tradition and hence rejects their identification with the Black masses (as most are part of the working class); on the one hand, Black bourgeoisie suffer from the contempt of the White world, which refuses to share its life with them, which prompts a deep-seated inferiority complex.[419] This isolation and limbo causes the Black bourgeoisie to create their own world and has made this particular faction of the Black community a complicated one to study. Frazier concludes *Black Bourgeoisie* with a look into the future, claiming that: "because of their social isolation and lack of cultural tradition, the members of the Black

[417] Frazier, E. Franklin. *Black Bourgeoisie.* The Free Press: Glencoe, Illinois, 1957.

[418] Ibid., 23.

[419] Ibid., 24.

bourgeoisie in the United States seem to be in the process of becoming NOBODY."[420] Here, is where the fictional George Jefferson comes into conversation.

George is the future of the Black bourgeoisie Frazier is describing. George Jefferson is scarcely discussed in academic discourse. When he is, as for example Robin Means Coleman's work on the Black sitcom, he is described as the "unprofessional professional" and "a coon personified." This reduces George's complex character to two negative stereotypes.[421] Coleman described "The Sambo" (a.k.a., coon) as "a house servant who sang, danced, strummed a banjo, spoke in a distorted, heavy dialect, and was characterized by a 'Tom'-like love for his master."[422] George does not depict a *love* for his masters (the White elites), even though he is envious of the prestige and status their wealth and Whiteness allows them to wield; he too, wants a piece of that pie. *Time Magazine* reflects on the legacy of George Jefferson as a dynamic force who was unapologetic about Black ascension. Although often looking down upon his own community when viewed through a bourgeoisie lens, Hemsley shaped Jefferson to give voice to the feelings of an ascent generation at a critical juncture in history. As Touré puts it: "he made us proud."[423]

George is a small businessman taking advantage of the capitalist moves of industry in the northern American states, which places him and his family in the economic category of the

[420] Ibid., 26.

[421] Coleman, Robin Means. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*. Garland Publishing, 1998. p.98.

[422] Ibid., 46.

[423] Touré, "Why Sherman Hemsley's George Jefferson was pitch perfect" *Time Magazine* 07/25/12.

upper middle class.[424] Owning a chain of successful dry cleaning stores throughout New York City, George's occupation is in line with Franklin's claim regarding the Black bourgeoisie and the significance of the "Negro business" in the American economy and economic life of the "Negro."[425] George's status as a businessman aligns with his usual demeanor—one of cunning arrogance and calculated steps. Whether he is purchasing furniture or tailoring his suits, these gesture are all an effort to insert himself into the economic elite. In addition, like Frazier suggests, as he attempts to place himself within the Black bourgeoisie, George often uses his money to maneuver his way into the lifestyle of the White economic elite social class and almost always fails. Louie Robinson of *Ebony Magazine* commented that, "George Jefferson is often the victim of his own acts: a put-down that backfires, a contrivance that goes astray, an ego-filled balloon suddenly deflated."[426] As he often attempts to reject his Black working class cultural past, his image as a Black man in this historically White space is often harshly recounted to him.

Although he may personify many aspects of the Black bourgeoisie that Frazier defines, the identity of George Jefferson proves more evolved than Frazier might have predicted when he made the term famous in 1957. Frazier's Black bourgeoisie came into money through birth and ancestry. By contrast, George is self-made. He makes this point known immediately in the

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[424] To be clear, the Jeffersons are members of the upper middle class, which is a social group constituted by higher status members of the middle class. This group consists mostly of white-collar professionals with above average personal incomes but also a higher degree of autonomy in their work. Being placed into this class makes the Jeffersons susceptible to the "bourgeoisie" classification as they have a certain cultural and financial capital that allows them access to an affluent and often opulent stratum—such as their neighbors in their Eastside high rise.
Thompson, William E.; Hickey, Joseph V. *Society in Focus*, 5th Edition, Pearson, 2005.

[425] Ibid., 23.

[426] Robinson, Louie. "The Jeffersons: A look at life on Black America's New Striver's Row" *Ebony Magazine*, January, 1976. p. 112.

show's first episode talking to his wife Louise proclaiming, "We're gonna have a real maid, with a uniform, one that fits my position. Remember, I worked my way from the bottom up to the top."[427] As *The Jefferson's* story arc often reminds its viewers, George came from very poor and humble beginnings. In fact, after growing up poor in what he terms the "ghetto" of Harlem, George and his family move to Queens, NY.[428] As *The Jeffersons* is a spinoff of Tandem Production's parent sitcom *All in the Family*, merging the viewing of the two shows together, it is explained that the moving of George, Louise, and Lionel Jefferson to the Upper Eastside (creating their own sitcom) is initiated when George launches his dry cleaning business with money from a car accident settlement. This eventually leads to a chain of dry cleaners.[429] George was not born into wealth nor had he obtained any formal higher education, both key elements of the Black bourgeoisie that Frazier outlines. With his quick wit, fast talking ability, history of making ends meet, which he learned through living poor in Harlem, and maybe just a little financial luck, George was able to establish an empire of his own, in essence buying his way into the Black bourgeoisie.

George's eagerness to leave behind to the community in which he grew up in is made evident early in the series through a discussion with his wife Louise.[430] After Diane (Paulene Myers), a Black maid in their new building mistakenly believes Louise is also a maid (since she is Black and spending time in a high-rise), an embarrassed Diane runs out of the Jefferson

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[427] *The Jeffersons*, Season 1 Episode 1 "A Friend in Need" by: Barry Harman and Harve Brosten 01/18/1975.

[428] A ghetto is a part of a city in which members of a minority group live, typically as a result of social, legal, or economic pressure.

[429] *All in the Family* Season 1 Episode 3 "Archie's Aching Back" 01/26/1971 and *All in the Family* Season 5 Episode 16 "The Jeffersons Move Up" 01/11/1975.

[430] *The Jeffersons*, "A Friend in Need"

home. From this particular scene, with Diane's uncomfortable facial expressions and her immediate switch from engaging in casual conversation with the Jeffersons to calling them "Mr." and "Mrs.," it's clear that social status inherently places a divide between those who live in a high-rise and those who clean one, regardless of race. While Louise is hurt that she is losing a friend, George grins at the respect that his new social status has given him.

Louise: Diane is my friend.
George: No, she's not, she's a domestic.
Louise: You make it sound like a disease.
George: Fact of life, Louise, you own an apartment in the building and she's a maid.
Louise: Now hold it right there, Buster! Ain't you forgetting where you came from?
George: It ain't the question of where I came from, it's the question of where I am…You are Eastside and she is Westside; I don't want no crosstown traffic in my kitchen.

Here, George is saying that he doesn't want any remnants of his past living on the Westside to coincide with the new image he is attempting to build. To George, The Eastside is new and prosperous as the Westside resembles past degradation. Due to George's newness to this space of wealth and buying his way in, Frazier may not identify George Jefferson within the Black bourgeoisie. However, George consistently tries and fails to use his money to buy into the social graces of the White elite. On numerous occasions these actions are in the form of rejecting his poor past and ancestry, the result is often George being made to feel or seem inferior.

As much as George attempts to push his Blackness and economically disadvantaged upbringing away from memory, he is consistently reminded of it throughout the early seasons of the show. It seems these moments are meant to humble George. A particular form of urban and working class Black cultural tradition comes to play when George is in argument with his frequent nemesis, Helen.[431] In defense of her husband, Helen engages George in a game of "the dozens." Through Robin D.G. Kelley's definition, whether it's called "capping," "snapping,"

[431] *The Jeffersons*, Season 1 Episode 13 "Jenny's Low" by: John Ashby 04/12/1975.

"ranking," "busting," "the dozens" was a kind of game or performance.[432] "The Dozens" is a game of spoken words between two people, common in Black communities, where participants insult each other until one gives up. It's customary for "the dozens" to be played in front of people who act as an audience. Commonly used to talk about somebody's mother, "the dozens," more than anything was an effort to "master the absurd metaphor, an art form intended to entertain rather than to damage."[433] Helen initiates the start of "the dozens" by pushing everyone back into a circle, leaving herself and George at the camera's center, like a boxing match, while she throws a rhyming verbal jab at George. Through her initiation, George must choose whether or not to engage in this specific cultural tradition. Too proud to let himself be insulted, George states, "Uh Oh! Gimme room!," making space for himself to jab back in the battle. Situations such as this scene show George's ability to break away from his status as high society, and hail back to his cultural roots when prompted.

George's wife Louise acts as a foil to his character as she is constantly reminding him to remember where he came from and to be modest about his spending, while she continues to hold on to the friends and poor Harlem community that George is far too eager to distance from his mind. Through George's force, Louise is encouraged to be a stay at home wife and to act and assume the identity of the rich by casting away their impoverished roots, by shopping daily, by having brunch, and by hiring a housekeeper. To oblige George, she frequently forces herself to "fake it till she makes it" by assuming a rich identity and rejects the community of their poor Black past, a discomfort that is visibly evident in the episode "Former Neighbors."[434]

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[432] Kelley, Robin D.G. *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Beacon Press, 1997, p.1.

[433] Ibid.

[434] *The Jeffersons*, Season 1 Episode 11 "Former Neighbors" by: Art Baer & Ben Joelson. 03/29/1975.

In this episode George aims to impress a high-society Black businessman (Coleman Harris) he hopes to do future business with by hosting an extravagant dinner. However, when Louise invites their poor friends from Harlem (Roy and Natalie Simms) to have dinner the same night, George schemes to hide his poor past to close the deal with Coleman Harris.

When George receives the news that Louise has invited their old friends to dinner as well, George attempts to cancel the Simms' invitation because he feels their Black working class antics won't mix well with the new image George is attempting to create for himself. In effort to make his case to Louise, George claims that Coleman Harris is the top dog in Black society, "one of the 400," of the financially and socially worthy of New York society, while the Simms are just common everyday folk. He claims that, "Roy and Natalie are meat and potatoes. Coleman is the upper crust." After the Simms' arrive, the class differences between them and the Jeffersons are almost immediately shown. Roy wears baggy, and loudly colored attire, as his orange plaid sports coat with tuxedo pants, aver. It's clear that he put together his very best to see his old friends in their "fancy new digs."



Figure 18 Roy and George clothing.

Portraying the Black poor in this manner was all too familiar to the Tandem Productions Costume Designer Rita Riggs, who styled the families of *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times*. With *The Jeffersons* she got to "finally do 'high-style' fashion, pretty and fancier clothes for Blacks," and she states that she very much enjoyed making George a "dandy" in his three-piece suits.[435] Rita Riggs' identification of styling George as a "dandy" can't be overlooked as it is critical to his identification and class status. A "dandy," historically from British traditions, is a man who places particular importance upon physical appearance, refined language, and leisurely hobbies, pushed with the appearance of nonchalance in a cult of self. In the case of dandyism, clothes work to perform and spectacularize identity. For Rita Riggs, as a White woman, to describe "making" George a dandy without referencing his Blackness, ignores the complex

[435] "Rita Riggs" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews,* 2003. *https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/rita-riggs*

facets that the "Black dandy" encompasses. As a cosmopolitan figure, George wants his wealth to be accepted in every circle; the image of the Black dandy often crosses and re-crosses boundaries of class, race, and nation. A Black dandy is an African Diasporic person (typically a man) who cleverly manipulates Western bespoke fashion, menswear in particular, through their usage of fine fabrics, colors, and patterns.

As Monica L. Miller notes in her book *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, "Black dandyism is a strategy of survival and transcendence."[436] Although George is not a Black dandy in sense that Miller intends, he is a pastiche of it. With wealth, George is able to control the dressing and appearance of his body, counter to when fine fabrics were unattainable to the Black masses due to histories of slavery and poverty. Ironically, George's business is in clothes and making them orderly and pristine. The aim of many Black dandies, similar to George, is to use their attire for "self and cultural (re)presentation aiming to subvert the provincialism of the color line."[437] George often attempts to blend these lines with his new rich, and mostly White, community via his attire, dress (often three-piece suits and ascots), and presentation. The Black dandy allures because of his slipperiness.[438] Through attire and adhering to the fashion moment, the Black dandy has challenged the way his body has been read by the dominant White European and American cultures while wearing the very garments produced by those cultures. As a result, Monica L. Miller argues, "Black dandyism serves as both liberation and a mode of conformity."[439] Through obtaining his wealth and

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[436] Miller, Monica L. *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. Duke University Press, 2009. p. 8.

[437] Ibid., 191.

[438] Ibid., 1.

[439] Ibid., 16.

altering his attire, George both liberates himself from the look and identity of Black poverty and conforms to the identity of the majority White rich in order to gain acceptance and access to this new social crowd. Onscreen, while fashioned in his three-piece suit George emits an image of respectability and status, as he seems to fully embrace the image in which he is *supposed* to assume. In many episodes this attire seems to be his gateway to respect and acceptance as he attends to and makes concessions for the White elite in his building for their network. George's short and plain image counters the popular stereotypes of Black people in tattered clothing and challenges the "look" of wealth, success, and refinement as being a sartorial identity, such as a tailored suit, rather than a race-based one that restricts his entry into the societal elite.

In contrast to Roy and his tacky attire, George opens the door wearing a navy three-piece suit tailored to fit. The Simms' are exuberant and break into song in their greetings to their old friends. As Louise joins in, George attempts to portray his idea of class by being tame and not indulging in their excitement. From the Simms' talk of muggers, rats, muscatel, and run-down buildings to them being almost star-struck at the Jefferson's new home, it's clear that the Simms' living situation is much less fortunate, and a reminder of where the Jeffersons came from.[440] The Simms' impoverished living condition, rather than causing them to compare themselves to their friend's success, has taught the Simms to be grateful for the things that they do have, and keeps them smiling and proud throughout their reunion. Talking about old times brings Roy and George to reveal painful parts of their upbringing, pain that is masked with their laughter.

George: I can never forget how poor we were. Things were so hard, when my father came home *with* a job, we didn't even know what that was! (*crowd laughter*)
Roy: I know! A job is something that the White dude *behind* you just got! (*crowd laughter*)

[440] Muscatel is a type of inexpensive fortified wine that is common in liquor stores in urban and low-income communities.

This scene is much more poignant because although they both laugh about the struggles that being poor brought them, Roy was still in that class status. It can be determined the type of people the Simms' are through Roy's initial reaction to George's financial success.

Roy: George, as long as one of us was going to make it, and it wasn't me, I'm glad it was you.

In order to protect George and not ruin his business plans with Coleman Harris, Roy pretends to be the owner of a chain of successful restaurants so as not to embarrass George in front of the financial elite. Louise gives moral lessons throughout and is firmly against the idea of Roy's hustle to "fake-it" for George's sake.

Roy: What am I supposed to do when this man asks me what line I'm in, and I gotta say the *unemployment* line? How's that going to make George look?
Louise: Like a man who chooses their friends for what they are and not for what they've got. (*crowd applause*).

Regardless of Louise's stance, George agrees to Roy's idea of lying and begins to coach him on how to act rich when Roy asks, "what do rich people talk about?"

George: Rich people don't talk about the three R's: Roaches, Rats, and Rent. They also don't talk about welfare, being broke, and unemployed.

With these topics being so prevalent in Roy's life he is bewildered and asks George "what else is there? George responds, "Money. They talk about how to make more money." After this exchange, Roy straightens his posture, flattens his tie, and begins to talk in a high posh accent. When Coleman Harris arrives, it is apparent through his attire (also styled in a three-piece suit) and arrogant demeanor, that he exudes the popular characteristics of Black bourgeoisie and wealth. In talking with Roy, who he believes to be a restaurateur, Coleman Harris seems impressed that he is in the vicinity of another Black elite like himself. His comfort in this safe-space of Black wealth drives Coleman Harris to begin discussing business with Roy.

Harris: You know, Simms, the trouble with the working class is that they don't want to work anymore. I don't know about you, but I'm having a lot of trouble getting *colored* help.

Harris begins to demean the Black working class because he believes he is in a space where the opulent share a common understanding about the "have-nots." When Roy questions how much Harris is paying his Black workers, Harris takes offense.

Harris: A lot of *our* people aren't answering the door when opportunity knocks…What difference does it make what I pay them? With all the people out of work, you think they'd be glad to get anything, but no they rather sit at home living lazy on welfare.

Offended by Harris' pomposity and his views on the Black working class, the hustle has failed and is halted: Roy and his wife Natalie can no longer hold their tongues. In the interim, George attempts to impress Harris with wine, even though he doesn't know the vintage, and by waiting on his every need. Although George has wealth, he is constantly engaging in the larger hustle of "faking-it" in order to conform. George performs a facade of lifelong opulence, acting out what he believes should be how the wealthy act. His ties to his cultural roots ultimately force George to choose the side of the Simms rather than Harris in the episode's conclusion. Yet, George makes sure to still express his disappointment of losing out on the business opportunity that would've been granted to him if he had sided with Harris.

The lifestyle of hustle economics that the Black working-class practices is not only performed by George in his efforts to make sense of his economic displacement in his new space of wealth, but it is also often used against him. When George interacts with his childhood friend in the episode "George's Skeleton" he sees that his wealth doesn't wash away his past hustling and its repercussions.[441] When an old friend threatens to expose embarrassing secrets from George's past unless he's paid in full, George quickly considers paying him. This form of

[441] *The Jeffersons* Season 1 Episode 6 "George's Skeleton" Story by: Erik Tarloff. 02/22/1975.

hustle economics, blackmail, is different than one's previously discussed, but nevertheless it is a form of informal business and staying financially afloat.[442] When George's old friend (Monk) enters the Jefferson home, George is noticeably agitated as if he has gone through a similar situation with Monk. It becomes clear that Monk has been consistently blackmailing George for years because when they were kids in Harlem, the two robbed a department store and spent a year in jail. George expresses to his neighbor Mr. Bentley:

George: My buddy's in town, and you can bet he's out to hustle me. He did it once before. The day Louise and I got married, he threatened me. Cost me 11 bucks, plus my argyle socks, and my Speidel watchband!

With George's present status as a successful businessman, he doesn't want his past incarceration exposed to his wife, son, and his new community. So, over the years he has complied with Monk's financial demands. For Monk, this secret was his meal ticket, a way to consistently have money at the expense of his old friend keeping his reputation intact. Upon Monk's entrance he immediately reveals that he is there to collect. Although a crook, Monk represents the life that George left behind when he became wealthy. From the mismatched clothes to the talks about the "old days in Harlem," Monk represents a scraping and impoverished community where one must resort to even conning one's friends to make a buck, further pushing George to distance himself from the past that continues to revisit his present life. When George signs a check for only $200, Monk pressures him to extort him for more.

Monk: I hate to take advantage of a brotha', but I got no choice. You got your family, you got your business, you got all of this, but most of all you got your pride. I figure your pride is worth, oh a thousand dollars to start.

This episode concludes with George putting his arrogance and pride aside and confessing his past incarceration to his family. To his surprise his family already knew about his time in jail.

[442] Blackmail is the action, treated as a criminal offense, of demanding payment or another benefit from someone in return for not revealing compromising or damaging information about them.

With a violent exit, Monk tells George, that it is people like him, "the blabbermouths," that ruin the blackmail business. I can't understate how vital this line is to the episode and series as a whole. While George, has a legitimate business operation, he is very much in the minority of this level of Black financial success in the mid-1970s. Though his business is legitimate, people that look like him, living just ten minutes west, are forced to contend with often shady and illegal business practices that have unfortunately become normal to them. No matter his wealth George is unable to escape his cultural background and the hustle economies he is often forced to engage with.

Although much of George's dealings with his past force him to confront economics head-on in unfavorable ways, many of his dealings with status and money work to teach moral lessons to *The Jefferson's* audience and to George himself. In "George Won't Talk," George is anxious to be a guest lecturer at a college until he realizes the school is in his old Harlem neighborhood.[443] Upon receiving the news that he was asked to be a guest lecturer, George thinks to use this platform to discuss his rise from the ghetto in Harlem to the small business mogul he became. Through the dialogue it is clear that poor Black Americans have multiple and intersectional boundaries that prevent them from upward mobility.

George: "I started out with three strikes against me. Living in the ghetto, strike one. No education strike two. Being Black, strike three, four, five, six, and a hundred."

In essence, George wants to use this speaking opportunity to "inspire" them, but really, he intends to boast about his rags to riches story and to publicize his stores. Much to George's disbelief, the community organizer who has asked George to speak inform George that he was actually asked to speak in a basement to a community group of young business-hopefuls in Harlem. Having been raised in Harlem, George is resistant to going back to what he deems the

[443] *The Jeffersons* Season 2 Episode 9 "George Won't Talk" by: John Ashby 11/08/1975.

ghetto, since his new life and identity exists in the Upper Eastside of Manhattan. Receiving pressure from Louise, George attends the talk. However, while there, his van and work supplies are stolen, further cementing his views on making it out of the ghetto and never coming back. When the community organizer brings the thief to confront George and apologize, George is reluctant to forgive him, and immediately seeks physical retaliation and to call the police. When the thief faces Lionel, the two embrace, and it becomes clear that they are friends from the old neighborhood who used to wreak havoc together. In fact, the thief (Train) calls Lionel "Diver" because he was known to be the one in the crew to "take a dive." In hustling terms, taking a dive, was meant to be an act of deception where an individual would cause a distraction, usually faking an illness, so that someone is distracted while others rob them. This interaction brings the two worlds of the Black haves and the have-nots together. As Lionel is now well off in the Upper Eastside due to his father's business success, Train is still in Harlem where they both started and had to hustle, lie, and cheat to make ends meet. Through the interaction of the two youth, George realizes that because of the example he set and having the ability to move Lionel out of Harlem, Lionel is no longer a petty thief, a predicament he possibly may have had to contend with if the family still had to struggle in the old neighborhood. To prevent George from calling the police on Train, Louise and Lionel confront George with a harsh truth about their present class status and reminding him where they came from and the predicaments their community still faces just blocks away.

Louise: If you [George] hadn't had the drive and the luck to get ahead and get us out of the old neighborhood—Lionel would be the crook.

Lionel: The other day the biggest problem I had was finding the right shirt to wear. Train's problem every day is trying to find a way to stay alive.

Some viewers of the show wrote Tandem to discuss that this episode is in fact "condoning theft" as well as supporting the idea that the people who have not gotten out of a poverty-stricken Harlem are all criminal and will end up like Train.[444] Although these claims have merit, I believe the episode has a deeper message than that. This exchange serves as a reminder to George that although he has "made it," his times in the old neighborhood have shaped his family, their resilience, and his own drive to make it out. Because of this he has a duty to help those that are still there who sometimes are forced to resort to illegal methods to survive daily—because regardless, those people are still *his* people. George shakes Train's hand, forgives him for his actions, and continues his commitment to speak to the community business class so that they too can have the opportunity and option to make it financially and "move up." This episode is so crucial to the larger story arc, because although the plot often attempts to distance the Jefferson's from this direct contact with people and actions of their past poverty, this episode reminds them of their times of scratching for survival and proves that no matter where you may be financially, the spirit of hustling to make ends meet is inherently a part of the poor Black culture that is within them. This hustle is a mode of survival that works within their nouveau-riche lifestyle, creating a feeling of economic displacement.

There are few moments across the series' tenure that challenge George's financial stability and in an episode ironically titled "Movin' on Down," the audience is finally introduced to a George that is in fear of returning to poverty.[445] As a spin on the popular "Movin' on Up" line in the series' opening credits, this episode places the Jeffersons in the midst of a supposed

[444] Norman Lear TV Shows/Productions Box #S-350, *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*.

[445] *The Jeffersons* Season 2 Episode 9 "Movin' on Down" by: Ken Levine and David Isaacs 11/01/1975.

financial ruin, counter to the ascension that the series is based upon. This throws the once arrogant prideful George off balance as he reflects on returning to the lifestyle of scratchin' and survivin' similar to the families of *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times*, a living condition he has hoped would remain a distant and harsh memory.

In "Movin' on Down" George's splendor of spending is halted when his business makes 50% less of a profit than it did in the previous year. Additionally, George loses ten thousand dollars on shoddy cleaning equipment, and his confidence is completely lost when he attempts to receive a business loan from the bank and is consistently given the run-around. On the brink of plans to open a new store, George laments to his wife, "Weezy, we gonna have to face it, we movin' on down." Upon George's fear of financial ruin, he describes a nightmare that he had the previous evening where cockroaches were waving to him and saying, "Welcome back George!" As he wakes up screaming from this nightmare, he deduces that it is foreshadowing his fear of going back to the ghetto. The opulence that his new lifestyle has afforded him has literally caused his past life in the ghetto to be one of his deepest fears, one that physically and psychologically controls his psyche. His work ethic is arguably a response to this fear and his desire to never return to the previous confines of struggling with poverty.

As George is faced with self-doubt, his son Lionel continues to ask for money in order to settle a bet with a schoolmate. This interaction with Lionel works to refuel George's confidence when George teaches Lionel a hustling ploy to help him win his money back. George teaches Lionel this trick which involves having people bet with two pairs of playing cards and one pair of dollar bills. George tells Lionel to pick the best pair, and when Lionel picks up a pair of cards, George picks up the pair of dollar bills. He reminds Lionel that he didn't say specifically "a pair of cards," George explains to Lionel to "always be the one to set the stakes," so in turn you are the one who can control your own destiny. Though it is mostly a lesson, this

card trick is also a ploy and a hustle of sorts because George literally obtains something in an underhanded way through purposeful misinformation. Amazed by "an old trick" George has taught him Lionel expresses how much he values these "smarts" that George has picked up along the way in his life through his times in the ghetto and in his legitimate business. Although George often attempts to distance himself from working class sensibilities, it is when he is reintroduced to those that he seems to learn a moral lesson that without them, he wouldn't be where he is in terms of financial success. Arguably a "pick yourself up by your boot straps," type of story, the blending of a nouveau riche life with people and practices of the lower class works to show humility of Black communities who reach financial success, a humility that isn't forced upon the financially well-off White communities on television. Regardless of the fact that the Jeffersons have transcended poverty, they are never able to truly escape it, their Blackness causes them to feel and be treated as being out of place in their earned economic status.

Thus far I have focused on George Jefferson. But a discussion of *The Jeffersons* would be incomplete without an analysis of the actress Isabel Sanford as Louise Jefferson and her navigation throughout Tandem Productions as a Black woman. Specifically, through this production history and *The Jeffersons* as a text, I will explain how Isabel Sanford embodies the tension between a working-class upbringing and an upper-middle class lifestyle. From the fan mail received at Tandem Productions, praising Sanford for her portrayal of Louise Jefferson as "elegant," "bold," and a "fierce Black woman," it is clear that many viewers (male and female) supported Sanford's role.[446] Like Esther Rolle (Florida Evans) of *Good Times* before her, Isabel Sanford as Louise Jefferson on *All in the Family* came before Sherman Hemsley as George Jef-

[446] Norman Lear TV Shows/Productions Box #S-350, *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*.

ferson. It was up to Sanford to make Hemsley comfortable and welcomed into the already established Tandem space. According to Hemsley, the two "instantly clicked, and it was if she knew him all along."[447] While on *The Jeffersons*, again much like Esther Rolle of *Good Times*, Hemsley exclaims that his working relationship with Sanford was great and the entirety of the cast respected her as she was the leader and always held herself with dignity and pride. In an interview, Hemsley laughs and states, "we [*The Jeffersons* cast] called her the Queen, we bowed to her." Although viewers are more likely to recognize Hemsley as George from *The Jeffersons* due to his loud and boisterous behavior, Sanford was the initiating and driving force that garnered the show's long success.

Part 2: *"We Called Her the Queen":* Isabel Sanford and Tandem Productions

As the only Black woman to win a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series, Isabel Sanford's portrayal of Louise Jefferson is vital not only to the history of Tandem Productions but to the history of Black women's roles on television in general. Although acting in a sitcom, Louise's comedic lines were few and usually came at the expense of George and his mother (Zara Cully). This is a point many fan letters highlighted in requesting Louise be given more of a voice on the show, and even a leading a role in another program so that she was "no longer confined behind George."[448] Where she shone was in her ability to weave laughter with a state of relatability, humility, grace, and high moral character. As discussed in previous chapters, the space and influence of Black women at Tandem Productions

[447] "Sherman Hemsley" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*, 2003. https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/sherman-hemsley.

[448] Norman Lear TV Shows/Productions Box #S-350, *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions*. (Over 10 fan letters available requested this)

took various forms. Some of the characterizations, like the more prominent Esther Rolle's portrayal of Florida Evans on *Good Times*, caused discontent from the actress towards Tandem and CBS. Others, such as LaWanda Page (as Aunt Esther in *Sanford and Son*), used their roles in the television space to subtly create a subversive identity of Black women on television. Isabel Sanford, it seems, traversed her time at Tandem in a space of both expressed discontent as well as the subtle mode of simply being present for a new vision of Black women's representation. Isabel Sanford's characterization of Louise Jefferson deserves greater scholarly scrutiny. Thus, I rely on interviews, a few academic citations, and limited production notes, and mostly textual readings to analyze not only the character Louise, but also Isabel Sanford and her creation of said character—making it clear that *The Jeffersons* was in fact *her* show.

Robin Means Coleman simply describes Louise Jefferson as a "Sapphire characterization."[449] A "Sapphire" is what Deborah Gray White defines as a domineering female who consumes men and usurps their role, and whose assertive demeanor makes them devoid of maternal compassion and understanding.[450] However, Louise's mixture of assertive and passive reactions to her rambunctious husband as well as her protective attitude toward her son consistently complicate the characterization of her as simply domineering. By contrast, Christopher J.P. Sewell in his brief discussion of the role of Louise describes her as a Black Mammy.[451] Here, Sewell believes that Sanford's Louise Jefferson, despite being the mother and wife, acted most

[449] Coleman, Robin Means. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*. Garland Publishing, 1998. p.98.

[450] White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, p.176.

[451] Sewell, Christopher J.P. "Mammies and Matriarchs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture 1950s to Present." in *Journal of African American Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3, *Springer*, (September 2013), p. 308-326.

times as the popular Black Mammy archetype.[452] Sewell claims, "due to her large size and expressive face, she was often the person in the show who came off as the nurturer and as being domestic. She acted as the voice of reason, as her husband George often acted hastily, she was nurturing to her son Lionel…and Louise often served the role of mediator between Blacks and Whites."[453] In Sewell's account, Louise is reduced to a very specific archetype. It is difficult to agree with Sewell's classification of Louise as a Mammy because Mammy historically served a White family, catering to a White mistress, White children, and a White home. Although she mentions having been a domestic in her younger years, on the show, Louise is never seen working for White people in any sort of domestic capacity.[454] Moving from *All in the Family* to *The Jeffersons*, Louise's character develops intertextually and I believe that identifying her solely as the Sapphire or Mammy is to misread the complexities the character's identity possesses as well as the actress performing the role. Sanford's characterization of Louise is much more layered and complex, and one that allows Sanford's performance to move past the writing. Above all, she weaves various characterizations into the role. Hill Collins writes, "self-definition has been essential to U.S. Black women's survival…by advancing Black women's empowerment

[452] "The 'Black Mammy' was a household servant who generally had specific duties to perform. These were mainly connected with the care of the children of the family, thus relieving the mistress of all drudgery work connected with childcare. When these duties were not pressing, which meant that, when the children were large enough to be able to help take care of themselves, she assisted mistress in household tasks. Her sphere of influence widened with the years of her service. She was next to the mistress in authority and 'bossed' everyone and everything in the household."
Parkhurst, Jesse "The Role of the Black Mammy in the Plantation Household" in *The Journal of Negro History* Vol. 23, No. 3 (July 1938).

[453] "Mammies and Matriarchs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture 1950s to Present" p. 320.

[454] In Season 1 Episode 1 "A Friend in Need", Louise reminds George that when they were a young married couple, she did domestic work a couple times a week.

through self-definition, these safe spaces help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African American institutions."[455] Self-definition or identification allows Black women to speak freely and resist static societal identifications, and act that Sanford mastered in her role as Louise in the early seasons of the series.

From her beginnings as a semi-regular on the *Carol Burnett Show* (1967-1978) to her guest role in the acclaimed film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), Isabel Sanford knew early on that television was a business and she treated it as such. Before Tandem reached its empire status, Sanford auditioned for the role of Louise Jefferson's sister on *All in the Family*. Upon her audition, *All in the Family* director, John Rich called her back for the role of Louise Jefferson.[456] In a Television Academy interview, Sanford commented that the bigotry and crass humor of the character Archie Bunker never offended her because she had consistently seen it in real life.[457] When Sanford was introduced to Louise as a character, she made it clear what she felt Tandem had wrong in imagining this Black woman specifically and Black women in general. In Sanford's interview she states, "I said to John, I wouldn't come running to George asking him how his day was. Black women don't do that. I wouldn't go running into the kitchen to get him anything —we don't do that."[458] John Rich took all that in and adjusted the character. Sanford claimed that she truly modeled Louise Jefferson after herself, and patterned Louise how she worked with her husband in real life. Although the scripts did not credit any

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[455] Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge, 2000, p. 98, p. 101.

[456] "Isabel Sanford" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews* https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/isabel-sanford#interview-clips 04/03/2002.

[457] Ibid.

[458] Ibid.

Black writers until many seasons later, when asked about her input into Louise's storylines, Sanford claims that Tandem allowed any cast members who didn't think that the line was right for them to say so.[459] With this opportunity, when possible, Sanford urged to depict Black women on television in a different light, counter to the often docile and compliant characterizations of Black women towards men on television.

Sanford often herself to the producer Bernie West saying, "You know I can memorize more than six lines, right? Can't you write me in a bit more?"[460] Her relationship with Tandem Productions Co-founder Norman Lear was so close and mutually respectful that Sanford skipped over the other producers and spoke directly to him. She consistently pressured him about the opportunity for more work. Sanford stated that whenever a new Tandem show came to fruition, she always fought to be on it. "When *Maude* came up, I asked can I do *Maude*? When *Good Times* came up, I asked can I do *Good Times*?"[461] However, Lear (who often recycled actors throughout his shows) continued to respond, "No, you're identified in *All in the Family*."[462] To which Sanford brashly responded, "six lines carried me for four years, and that's how I'm identified?"[463] It seemed as though Sanford could not catch a break, was growing tired of the role, and considered moving on from it.

When Carrol O'Connor (who portrayed the star Archie Bunker in *All in the Family*) walked off of *All in The Family* for weeks at a time in a contract dispute with Norman Lear,

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[459] Ibid.

[460] Ibid.

[461] Ibid.

[462] Ibid.

[463] Ibid.

Sanford finally got those extra lines and screen time.[464] She laughs that she loved when O'Connor was on strike as it was one of the best times of her early career because more lines were written for her.[465] Sanford remained outspoken with the show's producers about choices they made—even the choice of Sherman Hemsley to play her husband. Being twenty-one years Hemsley's senior, Sanford was initially unsure about the pairing. In her first interaction with him, Sanford described Hemsley as a "little man that I could've squashed like a bug." She goes further to say, "I don't know how Norman and John could think we looked like a good couple. But apparently, they had something right that I couldn't see."[466] No matter the magnitude of the change requested, if Sanford had a concern with her character's direction, she voiced it.

Upon discussion of an all-Black spinoff from *All in the Family*, Sanford was first very reluctant. As the only cast member who objected, Sanford claimed, "I didn't want to do the spin off because *All in the Family* was a success. So, I initially turned *The Jeffersons* down. I didn't know what would come of it."[467] However, when Tandem casting director, Jane Murray contacted her, Sanford was faced with a challenging career decision. Murray told Sanford that if the spinoff passed muster Tandem would write Louise off of *All in the Family* and move her to *The Jeffersons*, with or without Sanford in the role.[468] Essentially, Sanford was forced to take a role in this risky new television production or face being left behind. Although the acclaimed

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[464] Although the racial dynamics were a large dispute of Redd Foxx's walkout on *Sanford and Son,* O'Connor's walkout was comparable in its impact on *All in the Family* and its dedicated fan base. Like Foxx, O'Connor received a raise and appeared in the series until it ended.

[465] Ibid.

[466] Ibid.

[467] Ibid.

[468] Ibid.

Sanford was the germinal influence for the show's creation and character, Louise was important enough to prompt the creation of a standalone show, Sanford as a Black actress was deemed expendable.

After initial talks of *The Jeffersons* being a spinoff, Norman Lear approached Sanford to discuss her clear dissatisfaction with the move.[469] Sanford shared with Lear that she was "scared to death" regarding this leap to her new series. Her fear came from the fact that on *All in the Family* she had few lines for laughs every now and then, but now it was up to her to carry a show, lamenting "I'm out in front."[470] This fear worked to drive Sanford through the transition, knowing that if she refused, she would be out of a job. This closeness she describes having with Norman Lear further comforted her in having faith with *The Jeffersons*. This built relationship was also a way in which Sanford was able to negotiate her terms and have the ability to speak freely, as the person carrying the show.

In the final episode of *All in the Family* that featured the Jeffersons before their spinoff, foreshadows the ways in which this new-found wealth will impact George and Louise Jefferson. In "The Jeffersons Move Up," George and Louise prepare for their move from Queens to Upper Eastside Manhattan due to George's business success.[471] With both Louise and George being from humble poor beginnings the move impacts them vastly differently. George is overjoyed to leave the past behind, while Louise fears moving to Manhattan's Eastside with "all those fancy folks." After a heartfelt embrace with her long-term neighbor Edith Bunker (played by Jean Stapleton), that brings the two to tears, it is clear that Louise isn't prepared for the new

[469] Ibid.

[470] Ibid.

[471] *All in the Family* Season 5 Episode 17 "The Jeffersons Move Up" by: Don Nicholl, Michael Ross, and Bernie West. 01/11/1975.

person she must become in the new White and rich space she will be occupying. She knows how to live, work, and scrape to make ends meet but she doesn't know how to be a rich housewife and it strikes fear in her because of the possibility of losing herself and her values as a working-class Black woman. She makes these fears clear to George, who (throughout the series) minimizes her concerns while encouraging her to simply bask in the success.

Louise: I'm afraid of going where I don't belong.
George: When you got the money—you belong.
Louise: George we are just plain folks.
George: Not anymore, we were plain folks $47,000.50 ago.

This verbal exchange between Louise and George Jefferson on their last appearance of *All in the Family* directly parallels with the emotions displayed in the opening credits of every episode of *The Jeffersons*. Every week during the opening credits the audience got to see the image of Louise wiping away her tears, given her fears of their new found-wealth; however, George gripped her hand in support and wore a large grin, excited about leaving his past behind. The tears represent her nostalgia or a longing for a much simpler past that are transferred intertextually from *All in the Family* to *The Jeffersons* and reiterated to the viewer every time they watch an episode of *The Jeffersons*. This works to make Louise Jefferson's feelings of displacement a leitmotif throughout the series. As George consistently attempts to make himself a part of this new high society life, Louise consistently attempts to reject it in an effort to not lose her sense of self. In Sanford's portrayal of Louise, the writers push her to embody stereotypical traits of femininity such as gentleness, empathy, sensitivity, and compliance. She was characterized as the voice of reason and the strength in the relationship, while George is able to express his arrogance, power, and at times pompous sensibility. These wholesome and virtuous attributes of Louise quickly became bothersome and limiting to Sanford and her abilities as an actress. Rather than recoil, as her character might, Sanford expressed her contention with the

writers and producers. Sanford claims that she would complain to them, "you got me pure as the driven snow, isn't there something I can say that would spice it up?"[472] Sanford asserts that far too often, the writers would simply respond, "George can say things like that, Louise can't," and her inquiries were usually pushed to the side.[473] It's clear here that the writing of Louise's character is gendered as the male writers often craft her character in the feminine tropes of docility and conservative, in comparison to George's masculine freedom of expression. Although Louise's (and Sanford concurrently) feelings are usually silenced, often she combats with George to make sure she is heard, an action scarcely seen by Black wives and women in television at this temporal moment. With a smile on her face Sanford reflects on a moment where she is listened to, and her character Louise is given more color.[474] In "Like Father, Like Son," when the money-flashing and lavish-spending George buys their son Lionel a fancy watch, Louise is in utter disbelief about such a sumptuous gift for no occasion.[475] Louise asks about the price of the watch and her reaction is met with a two minute long laugh from the studio audience.

Louise: That watch must be at least $100.
George: $350.
Louise: $350 for a watch?! NIGGA PLEASE!

Sanford relished in being able to add this shock value in unexpected moments as the comedic relief. These moments were so pivotal because they were out of character to the quotidian mannerisms and reactions of her character Louise, this loud, combative, and somewhat cursing response was much more in the norm of the character George. Although, moments like these

[472] "Isabel Sanford" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews* https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/isabel-sanford#interview-clips 04/03/2002.

[473] Ibid.

[474] Ibid.

[475] *The Jeffersons* Season 1 Episode 12 "Like Father Like Son" by: Frank Tarloff, 04/05/1975.

were few and far between, Sanford's expressed contention regarding the simplicity of Louise's character incited writing changes like these. The fact that they were so few added to the shock value and memorability when they took place. These juxtaposing reactions to Black upward mobility and fiscal responsibility, like expressed in the episode just referenced, make for a compelling tension that drives a great deal of the episodic plots in *The Jeffersons*.

In the pilot episode of *The Jeffersons* "A Friend in Need," Louise is obviously tense, lost, and uncomfortable in her efforts to make a home out of her new life in a luxurious high rise.[476] Her characterization in the early episodes of *The Jeffersons* expands from the popular understandings of a Mammy or Sapphire archetype. Of course, there may be times that her actions match these archetypes, however Sanford constructs Louise's identity as one that resists categorization. In order to combat her feelings of displacement and nostalgia, Louise attempts to spark a friendship with a Black maid (Diane) in the building. When Diane is surprised to find out that Louise is actually a tenant and not a maid like herself, Diane storms out in embarrassment. The money that Louise's family now possesses, has changed the way that people view her, rendering her image out of her control. Working class people, like Diane in this instance, are often casted in opposing social circles with the wealthy, regardless of if they share the same race. Louise laments over the fact that someone who she once shared a class status and even an occupation with (as Louise mentions her past as a part time maid for White families), has casted Louise as "other," as a friendship between a maid and a homeowner is seen to be unimaginable. This works to further Louise's already strong sense of the isolation and non-belonging of a former working-class Black woman being hoisted into high society.

[476] *The Jeffersons* Season 1 Episode 1 "A Friend in Need" Story by: Barry Harman and Harve Brosten Teleplay by: Don Nicholl, Michael Ross, Bernie West, Barry Harman, and Harve Brosten. 01/18/1975.

Amidst these feelings, her husband George urges her to accept her new status and the rights of passage and privilege it affords her. Louise remains steadfast in attempting to remind George of where they come from and that they are still just "plain folk." However, her efforts are to no avail as George grabs firmly to the lapels of his suit and demands that Louise hire a maid because it's what rich families do. Not just any maid, George says, a Black one. This exchange leads to a deeper insight of Louise's history and her morals around domestic servitude.

Louise: Remember when Lionel was growing up and I did domestic work twice a week to help out? Remember the folks I worked for? It was "Yes, Ma'am, No Ma'am." Now how can I ask Diane to say "Yes, Ma'am" to me?
George: Because now you're the Ma'am. Some people gotta be the Ma'ams and the rest gotta be the Mam'mies.

Here, George urges Louise to realize that they have transcended from servicing others and now they deserve to be the ones who are serviced. Continuing to groan over the money it would cost to hire a maid, Louise expresses how a "lifetime of being poor" leads her to constantly rejecting what she deems as frivolous spending. For Louise, her largest struggle throughout much of the early series is learning how to be rich and consistently being pushed to move on from her working-class sensibilities. Eventually she gives in and finds a maid (Florence, played by Marla Gibbs). Even after acceding to George's wishes, Louise expresses her discomfort with having another person picking up after them through barely repressed arguments with George and constant complaints to her neighbors, the Willises, about her sorrow at her nouveau-riche lifestyle. Much of her grief comes from the fact that while she was poor, she assumed that money would solve their problems, however, George and Louise's opposing reactions of having wealth is what really causes their strife.

Louise's identity constantly shifts from compliant to self-willed when she expresses her continuous troubles with adjusting to "the good life," throughout episodic texts following the pilot. In "Louise Feels Useless" these troubles of assimilation drive Louise to discomfort in her

own home.[477] With her son Lionel in school, George always at work, and their new maid cleaning up after them, Louise expresses that, "nobody needs me anymore, I got no reason for getting out of bed in the morning." In order to feel useful, Louise asks George if she can work part-time in his cleaning store that exists in the lobby of their building. Firmly against "these honkies" seeing his wife working, George takes a firm stance regarding Louise's request.

George: I don't want you to work, you've worked long enough. You've earned the right to do what all other high-class New York ladies do. Nothing.

George wanted Louise to fit into a mold of what a high society wife was supposed to do. Using the Willises as her sounding board, Louise can't help but express her displeasure in the fact that George is attempting to make her something that she is not. When Louise meets a man desperate for part-time help at his store, despite George's feelings, Louise takes the reins of her own life and offers her assistance to work. Unbeknownst to her, it is a job at a competing cleaning store. Upon taking the job, which is still a secret from George, we see Louise smiling and singing, finally happy in her home as she has a reinvigorated purpose that exists outside the walls of hearth and home. Similar to the ways in which White women characters like Lucy, in *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) felt a sense of freedom and purpose when they left the home and went to work.[478] Louise is able to reject the stay at home posh lifestyle that is being forced upon her. However, the secret of her job does not leave room for as much liberation and agency that Louise had hoped for. Resisting in silence works to take away from the larger stand that Louise intended to make because she now feels guilty for hiding something from her husband. When Louise is forced to come clean about her new job, George demands her to quit. After space and

[477] *The Jeffersons* Season 1 Episode 3 "Louise Feels Useless", by: Lloyd Turner and Gordon Mitchell 02/01/1975.

[478] *I Love Lucy* Season 2 Episode 1 "Job Switching" 09/15/1952.

reflection Louise adheres to George's disapproval of her working for the competition, however she finally takes a stand against George when she exclaims, "I am going to work downstairs, and that's that!" George's response is simply a blank stare of approval into the camera as it fades to black on the scene.

Through these early examples of Louise's characterizations alone, I believe (at least early in the show's tenure) that although Sanford as Louise may have often acted on tropes of the Sapphire or the Mammy, to classify her role in such a static matter is reductive. As Patricia Hill Collins states, "U.S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female," and this world comes in various forms.[479] To be clear, there are some issues with Louise's representation in her varying portrayals of race, class, gender, and sexuality. These issues largely stem from the overtly White and masculine perspective of the show's writing staff and their imagination of Black womanhood. However, as there is not one example of Black womanhood, the imagery Louise Jefferson depicts a fluidity of the Black female form. She can be submissive, posh, domestic, and nurturing, yet she can also assume agency, travail, and command respect. Although Louise's character embodies identification beyond the historical sapphire figure, she often shares traits with the character Sapphire on *Amos n' Andy*. As many claimed the role of Sapphire was stereotypical of shrewish Black bossy wives. Sapphire in *Amos n' Andy* only scolded her husband when he deserved it, but most often her character was a kindly, loving and loyal wife—much like Louise. This fluid imagery of Black womanhood is more evident throughout *The Jeffersons*, than in any other Tandem Black sitcom. Through the identities of Black domestic servitude (Florence and Diane), the nouveau-riche (Louise), and old money (Helen Willis), the very first episode of *The Jeffersons* alone

[479] Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge, 2000, p. 23.

makes way for a new diversity of Black women's identities blended on one television show. A transformative image highlighted vividly by the Jefferson's new maid Florence in the final scene of "A Friend in Need." With Florence and Diane standing in between Louise and Helen in the Jefferson's doorway, Florence looks at the group of women and is perplexed.

Florence: You folks mind if I ask something? (*To Louise*) You live in this apartment, right? (*To Helen*) And you got an apartment in this building too? Well how come we overcame, and nobody told me?!"

A clear nod to the protest song and popular anthem of the Civil Rights and other movements, "We Shall Overcome," this line caused a hysterical laugh from the characters on screen as well as the studio audience.[480] The comedy in this line comes from the delivery of Florence and the way in which she is able to discuss a pivotal moment of change in a perplexing and amusing tone. However, reading deeper into the line, it seems the laughter is conjured more out of a space of discomfort the domestic workers look to the Black women who have obtained wealth while the domestics have seemingly missed their opportunity. Marla Gibbs (the actress who played Florence) says that this line is memorable to *The Jefferson's* fans till this day.[481] To "overcome" meant to prevail over various injustices that the Civil Rights and other movements fought against. Injustices such as racial discrimination, sexism, and unfair working conditions caused protestors to shout these words as a declaration for better days to come. To Florence, seeing a Black woman—not a domestic—living in a high-rise demonstrated "overcoming,"—not so uplifting to her and Diane as they still exist to serve others. This symbol of "overcoming" seen on *The Jeffersons* exists as just one example of the ways in which this show worked

[480] Bobetsky, Victor. "The complex ancestry of 'We Shall Overcome'" in *Choral Journal* Vol. 57 p. 26-36.

[481] "Marla Gibbs" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*, https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/marla-gibbs#interview-clips, 07/27/2006.

against popular understandings of Black life. Making this proclamation directly to the audience was making it clear that this show was unlike any other, and its representation of Black women would follow suit. Probably the least subtle of these resistances to the norm is the sitcom's discussion of racial passing and its depiction of the first ever interracial (specifically Black and White) marriage on television.



Figure 19 "How come we overcame, and nobody told me?"

PART 3: *"Zebras," "Honkies," and "Niggas"*

The Jeffersons, arguably more than in any other Tandem Black sitcom, places Black and White racial controversy front and center in its narrative arc. It is seen in the early and con-

sistent use of the words "Nigga" and "Honkey" throughout the first and second season, the instances of racial passing, and most vividly in the interracial intimacy and marriage of Helen and Tom Willis (portrayed by Roxie Roker and Franklin Cover respectively).[482] Unlike other Black sitcoms of Tandem, *The Jeffersons* places White characters in recurring supporting roles, which is consistent with the show's theme of placing a once poor Black man, into a space and community of majority White wealth.[483] Through episode analysis, interviews, newspaper articles, and audience reception, a compelling discussion emerges about the intersection of Black and White identity and the individuals of Tandem Productions who helped contribute to it on television in *The Jeffersons.*

Although the history of the "miscegenation issue" is dated much earlier, as the case was proximate in time with *The Jeffersons*, I believe the history of the Loving v. Virginia case to be very important to discuss here in terms of interracial marriage.[484] In 1958, Mildred and Richard Loving (a Black woman and a White man, respectively) traveled to Washington D.C. to marry,

[482] "Nigga" is a colloquial term that began as an eye dialect form of the word *nigger,* an ethnic slur against Black people. While "Honkey" is a derogatory term used to describe a White person or White people collectively.

[483] Although *Sanford and Son's* character Officer "Hoppy" Hopkins (portrayed by Howard Platt) is seen very often throughout the series. The characters of Tom Willis and Harry Bentley (portrayed by Franklin Cover and Paul Benedict respectively) exist in the majority of *The Jeffersons* episodes, exist in the opening credits sequence, and even have story lines that revolve around them.

[484] Further readings on the history:
Courtney, Susan. *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race*. Prince University Press, 2004.
Gilmore, Glenda. *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

evading their home state of Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which made marriage between Whites and Non-Whites a crime.[485] After multiple arrests in Virginia for their marriage, Mildred wrote letters to the American Civil Liberties Union who aided in filing motions that the Virginia state laws on interracial marriage violated the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause.[486] The matter then made its way to the Supreme Court. In 1967, the Supreme Court ruling in the case Loving v. Virginia established marriage as a fundamental right for interracial couples, and struck down all U.S. state's laws that prevented this right.[487] Although laws such as these were mostly upheld in the American South, which often adhered to strict Jim Crow segregation laws, 72% of the public opposed the court's decision at the time and many decried it as judicial overreach and resisted its implementation for decades.[488] It is no coincidence that this case largely impacted the reception of the film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Starring Sidney Poitier and Katharine Hepburn, the film was one of the few films of the time to depict an interracial marriage in a positive light, as interracial marriage historically had been illegal in most states of the United States until the ruling of Loving v. Virginia, just six months prior to the film's release. Although much of what angered viewers was the fact that the man was Black and that the woman was White, this film was a step in attempting to normalize interracial marriage and relations in general throughout the United States.

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[485] Viñas-Nelson, Jessica "Interracial Marriage in 'Post-Racial' America" in *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective* Vol. 10, Issue 12, September 2017. http://origins.osu.edu/article/interracial-marriage-post-racial-america.

[486] The clause, which took effect in 1868, provides "nor shall any State [...] deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

[487] Viñas-Nelson, Jessica "Interracial Marriage in 'Post-Racial' America"

[488] Ibid.

Just eight years after this revolutionary Supreme Court decision, the Willises (as the first specifically Black and White interracial marriage) entered the public eye on primetime television in *The Jeffersons*. Similar to the Lovings, the Willises (Helen and Tom) are a married Black woman and White man, however their placement in the North keeps them from much of the de facto segregation experienced by the former. The interracial marriage between Helen and Tom is consistently poked fun at from the show's protagonist, George Jefferson. Although a sitcom that stands for a fictitious imagination of reality, the presence of the Willises as the first interracial (between Black and White persons) marriage on television and the often complex interactions surrounding their union, mirrors the true feelings of many Americans. Helen represents a history of Black wealth, high society, and elegance. With a father who is a self-made banker, Helen had always been privy to financial stability and comfort. The Tandem Productions Costume Designer, Rita Riggs, even comments on her excitement to finally do "high-style" fashion with Helen, who represents a Black woman with means.[489] Helen is often the character that helps Louise adjust to the life of wealth and opulence, encouraging Louise that she deserves to enjoy life and spend money. While Tom is the descendent of Northern politicians and is an executive at a publishing company, his Whiteness seems to be a connection to historical wealth, as his past is talked about much less frequently than Helen's.

George, who is notably opposed to interracial relationships, has a deep loathing for interracial couples.[490] George often plays his discontent and ignorance comedically at the Willises expense. With his own history of dealing with bigotry, it seems George uses comedy in reference to the Willises relationship as a defense mechanism so that he doesn't have to cope

[489] "Rita Riggs" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews,* 2003. https://interviews.television-academy.com/interviews/rita-riggs

[490] Miscegenation is the interbreeding of people considered to be of different racial types.

with the reality of a happy relationship existing across racial lines—especially between Black and White. Although the effect of the comedy draws much laughter and becomes a running joke, the fact that it doesn't sway the Willises is why George persists with the insults throughout. George's son Lionel dates (and eventually marries) Jenny, the Willises daughter who is Black *and* White—and George's discomfort grows when the Willises are getting more deeply enmeshed in his family and social circle. George often calls Tom a honkey and refers to the couple as the Zebras (pejorative slang for interracial couples), vanilla and chocolate, day and night, and even buys them towel sets (His: White towel with black lettering and Hers: brown towel with white lettering).[491] This fluidity of George as a Black man being able to freely use the terms "nigga" and "honky" without being reprimanded drew criticism from some, seemingly racist, viewers. Particularly in a letter addressed to Norman Lear, a viewer believed it to be discrimination that George can say the word "honkey" while a White person can't respond in a similar fashion. The viewer suggested a suitable tag that would equate would be allowing a White person to say "nigger" on the show, in response to the antics of George.[492] Nevertheless, George refuses to normalize interracial marriage, while Louise consistently comes to their defense and grows a strong friendship with Helen. Because she has married a White man, George often challenges Helen's Blackness. And their back and forth banter becomes a running gag. Even when the Willises aren't present George makes fun of their marriage. For example, in the series' first episode, while George is arguing with Louise about hiring a maid, Lionel comments about the Willises having one.

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[491] *The Jeffersons* Season 1 Episode 2 "Georges Family Tree" by: Perry Grant and Dick Bensfield. 01/25/1975.

[492] Norman Lear TV Shows/Productions Box #S-350, *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions* 09/26/1975.

Lionel: That's not a bad idea Mom. Jenny's parents have an apartment like this, they have a maid.
George: Only one? I figured the Willises would have three maids.
Lionel: Three?
George: Well I figure, A Black one for Mr. Day, A White one for Mrs. Night, and a plaid one for Jenny.[493]

Whilst joking at their expense, George also consistently centers himself in between the two, in efforts to pin Helen and Tom at odds with one another. In an episode regarding a local election, Helen and Tom find themselves at odds when the opposing candidates they support need the endorsement of George's dry cleaners.[494] Assuming that Helen is supporting the Black candidate, George instantly approves her request. Much to his surprise, Helen is backing the White candidate and Tom is backing the Black one. No matter the candidate's political agenda, George supports the Black one and sides with Tom, leaving Helen and Tom at odds publicly and in the home, much to George's enjoyment. Even directly in the first episode, George attempts to throw a wrench into the happy marriage of Helen and Tom.[495] Amidst Louise and George arguing in front of the Willises, Louise asks George why do they fight so much, and why can't they talk it through like Tom and Helen do? "They don't fight." Forever "calling a spade a spade," George responds in a very matter of fact way.

George: They don't fight because they're scared to fight.
Helen: What does that mean?
George: You know damn well what it means! If you two ever started really going at one another, inside of five minutes he'd be calling you…
Helen: Don't say it!
George: Nigga!

[493] "A Friend in Need" Season 1 Episode 1.

[494] *The Jeffersons* Season 1 Episode 12 "Like Father, Like Son" by: Frank Tarloff 04/05/1975.

[495] "A Friend in Need" Season 1 Episode 1.

This verbal exchange leads Helen to question why the words "honkey" may cross her mind in an argument or if the word "nigga" ever crosses Tom's. No matter the instigation, the interracial marriage of the Willises is constantly brought up in the show's storyline. Although the discussion of it is not always unfavorable (unless it's from George) the interracial nature of their marriage is something the Willises cannot escape as it is so uncommon to societal norms. In one of their frequent gripe sessions about George, Louise expresses her envy of Helen and Tom's marriage.[496]

Louise: You two seem to handle your problems so well.
Tom: What problems?
Louise: (*looks down nervously*) Well... Uh you know…uh, you and Helen.
Helen: Oh! The "biggie"
Tom: That's not *our* problem, its other people's they're the ones who can't handle it.

The "biggie" referred to here is the biggest problem that they deal with in their union: being different races. Helen goes on to explain that when they announced their marriage to their families, Tom's parents yelled, screamed, and even fainted over the news. While Helen's parents completely wrote her out of her family's inheritance. Through the years of family isolation and outside hatred, it is difficult to portray optimism regarding a world that largely doesn't accept their union. However, somehow, they muster the courage it requires to do so.

Helen: Point is, if you feel you're right, you've got to do things your own way.

Although Helen and Tom of *The Jeffersons* represent the first televisual foray into a Black and White interracial marriage, their presence adds to a complicated history of interracial intimacy on television. In the original popular science fiction series *Star Trek* (1966-1969), de-

[496] Ibid.

spite science-fiction conventions that privilege metaphor and allegory, network decision-makers attempted to curtail and control the creative staff's liberal-humanist project.[497] Perhaps the most famous example of this back and forth surrounds the production of Season 3 Episode 10 "Plato's Stepchildren," which calls for the main protagonist Captain Kirk (a White man), manipulated by Greek-god-like aliens, to kiss his crewmember Uhura (a Black woman). According to most speculations, this would have been American network television's first interracial kiss between a Black and a White person. Apparently, NBC was concerned with the fallout of such a "first," especially among its affiliates in the South, and requested some less than subtle changes. A memorandum from Jean Messerschmidt of NBC's Broadcast Standards Department made the network's position explicit: "it must be clear there are no racial over-tones to Kirk and Uhura's dilemma."[498] While many creative decision-makers resisted the network's capitulation to racism, NBC nevertheless continued with their aim of censoring the interracial "dilemma." Apparently they even requested that Spock, the racialized alien half-breed, be the one to kiss Uhura.[499] Actress Nichelle Nichols (who portrays Uhura) explains: "Somehow, I guess, they found it more acceptable for a Vulcan to kiss me, for this alien to kiss this black woman, than for two humans with different coloring to do the same thing." She continues: "It was

[497] *Star Trek* is an American science-fiction television series created by Gene Roddenberry that follows the adventures of the starship USS Enterprise and its crew. The article referenced is Bernardi, Daniel "Star Trek in the 1960s: Liberal Humanism and the Production of Race" in *Science Fiction Studies* No. 72, Vol. 24, Part 2, July 1997, p. 216.

[498] This memo, in the Gene Roddenberry Papers housed in Special Collection at University of California Los Angeles, attempts to censor any material of a sexual nature: "Caution on the postures and actions of our four principles so that no impropriety can be suggested. The embraces must not be such as would embarrass a viewer, and there must be no open-mouth kissing."

[499] Bernardi, Daniel "Star Trek in the 1960s: Liberal Humanism and the Production of Race" p. 216-217.

simply and clearly racism standing in the door...in suits. Strange how a twenty-third century space opera could be so mired in antiquated hang-ups."[500]

The scene that was aired shows Kirk paired with Uhura and Spock paired with the spaceship's nurse. It begins with the telekinetic Greeks controlling the physical movements of these characters, making them walk and dance in contorted and humiliating ways for the pleasure and amusement of their captors.[501] Soon a large group of the Greeks watch as their leader forces Spock to kiss the nurse several times. In this scene the audience can *see* Spock kiss the nurse as their lips are visibly touching on screen on multiple shots. The group also watches Kirk and Uhura diligently resist their *forced* coupling. These shots are also drawn out, dramatizing the extratextual racial tension surrounding their pairing.[502] Since this is coupling a Black woman and a White man, it is taboo and met with much more resistance and struggle between the two characters whilst they are in their trance. Unable to fight the trance Kirk turns Uhura's body toward the camera, the back of her head taking up most of the bottom half of the screen and forcibly presses his lips against Uhura's while staring in anger at the group watching them. Although accounts from Nichelle Nichols explain that the two actually did kiss, the audience is restricted from the sight of their actual lips touching one another's.[503] "NBC's Office of Broad-

[500] Ibid., 217.

[501] Ibid.

[502] Ibid.

[503] Nichols, Nichelle. *Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memories*, G.P. Putnam and Sons New York, 1994, p.195-198.

cast Standards and the creative decision-makers compromised: the interracial kiss was only implied."[504] This implication complicates the reality of a Black and White person sharing the intimacy of a kiss on screen. It is essentially forced upon the two characters and even through force, this forbidden action is blocked from audience view.

In a Television Academy interview with *The Jeffersons* producer, George Sunga, he comments that he remembers vividly Norman Lear saying to Roxie Roker and Frank Cover before *The Jeffersons* pilot, "you must be able to kiss each other and mean it."[505] Giving the producers and writers at Tandem credit for their courageousness, although this interracial intimacy was being labeled as a forbidden act on screen in order to prevent backlash on *Star Trek* six years prior, Tandem used the very first episode of *The Jeffersons* to debunk that, in spite of the possible negative responses that they may receive. Even the show's star, Sherman Hemsley, commented that everyone feared showing interracial intimacy on screen, he was particularly fearful of the fact that an interracial marriage would get them canceled since "no one has done it before."[506] Yet, in a very private moment on screen between Helen and Tom outside of the Jefferson's doorway, the audience intervenes to watch the two share a very passionate and obvious kiss. With the camera oscillating from a wide over the shoulder shot to a medium shot of the two—center screen—with Helen's arms wrapped around Tom and their lips pressed in a firm embrace. There is no question that their kiss is real and within the characters' control. The kiss lasts until they are embarrassingly interrupted by their neighbor coming out of the elevator,

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[504] Ibid.

[505] "George Sunga" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*, 02/01/2008. https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/george-sunga#interview-clips

[506] "Sherman Hemsley" *Television Academy Foundation Interviews*, 2003. https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/sherman-hemsley.

leading them to laugh and to embrace even closer. Whether or not the forcible kiss of Kirk and Uhura was on their mind, Tandem defiantly made it clear that interracial intimacy on screen was possible and they risked the cancellation of their show to prove it.



Figure 20 Helen and Tom Willis share a kiss.

As an entity producing five acclaimed shows at the time, Tandem Productions could afford the possible backlash towards one of them. Yet, the actors portraying this interracial marriage, Roxie Roker and Franklin Cover, could not afford such backlash. They in fact were the ones risking their careers to make an important stand. Although this interracial marriage and intimacy is accepted by *most* of the characters within the story line, to show that a great deal of America is forward thinking in its principles towards marriage, much of the real-life audience met the sight of Helen and Tom Willis on screen with abhorrence. In hate mail regarding *The*

Jeffersons, audience members particularly chastised Norman Lear for his "filthy shows." Specifically, in this case, the audience berated Lear for showing interracial marriages on television. A writer from Philadelphia claimed "I don't know anyone married or going with a Negro so it just isn't real life."[507] Regardless of whether the letter writer knew any interracial couples in his circle of friends, a 1970 study of married couples that have a Black wife and a White husband total an astounding number of 51,420 couples combined in the North and West of the United States, a 66 percent increase since 1960—Black and White marriage was very real.[508]

Other letters from many disgruntled Southern viewers were sent directly in attack of the actor Franklin Cover, who some saw as a disgrace to White people. One particular letter addressed to Cover stated that, "with about 90% of people strongly against Black and White interracial marriage, it's difficult to know whether or not you work-needy class-B actors are in cahoots with those goddam producers-selling miscegenation to the American people…preparing them to accept the Marxists' long standing goal of mass-hybridization."[509] It's clear here that many believed that the existence of an interracial marriage on screen was no more than a plot to encourage interbreeding, an act that many protestors resisted. Collective social groups even wrote directly to CBS to push for *The Jefferson's* cancellation. They claimed that the existence of the show "continued to insult the intelligence of the American public by insisting that all those who oppose miscegenation are bigots. Blacks are justly proud of their race as are Whites.

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[507] Norman Lear TV Shows/Productions Box #S-350, *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions* 09/30/1976.

[508] Heer, David M. "The Prevalence of Black-White Marriage in the United States 1960 and 1970" in *Journal of Marriage and Family* Vol. 36, No.2 (May 1974), p. 246-258.

[509] Norman Lear TV Shows/Productions Box #S-350, *Pacific Title Archives, Act III Productions* 12/26/1975.

Miscegenation is the true bigotry because it announces to the world that one believes there should no longer be racial differences as provided by nature and evolution. Nuts to CBS and 'The Jeffersons.' You are true bigots, doing your best to put an end to the races."[510] To Tandem and the actors of *The Jeffersons*, these letters simply made it clear that their presence on screen was even more necessary than they had imagined.

Despite these letters of hatred and racism towards the interracial marriage on screen, *The Jeffersons* continued to be successful, and the presence of Helen and Tom Willis was integral to that success. However, interracial marriages in the United States experience numerous uncertainties and strains outside their union. As F. James Davis suggests, "a major problem is the way the community classifies and treats the children of such marriages. A great many intermarried parents, primarily the White parents, apparently hope and believe that people will overlook the racial mixture and just treat the child as a human being. Even children who are well prepared to be defined as Black can experience some problems, but those who are not so well prepared are likely to get some rude shocks as they get older."[511] In a 1976 interview with the *Washington Post,* Roxie Roker is featured as a Black woman on the rise, reflecting on her accomplishments as Helen Willis on *The Jeffersons*.[512] In conversation regarding the season one finale episode, "Jenny's Low," Roker discusses how she had strong objections to the original script and voiced her concerns to demand adjustments be made.[513] Roker commented that in this episode, "our [the Willises] son who had been abroad returned. He's fair-skinned and was

[510] Ibid. 03/06/1976.

[511] Davis, F. James. *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, p.144.

[512] Trescott, Jacqueline. "Roxie Roker: Moving On Up" *Washington Post* March 1976.

[513] *The Jeffersons* Season 1 Episode 13 "Jenny's Low" by: John Ashby 04/12/75.

able to pass, our daughter is dark complexioned. Now, the script wanted me to show favoritism towards her because she is brown like me, I couldn't. I am the mother, I wouldn't treat any child that way. More than anything I want the script to be believable." This particular episode handles a racial situation that was never before seen in the sitcom form on television, passing.

In this season one finale, the Willis' daughter Jenny (Berlinda Tolbert) becomes jealous when her brother Allan (Aaron Rubin) returns from Europe because he is able to "pass" as White while she can't. Racial passing occurs when a person classified as a member of one racial group is accepted as a member of a racial group other than their own, usually for the better treatment that one racial group has over the other. According to F. James Davis, "those who pass have a severe dilemma before they decide to do so, since a person must give up all family ties and loyalties to the Black community in order to gain economic or other opportunities."[514] Here, I am using passing to describe a Black person who is able to assimilate into White culture and society due to their skin tone that may favor White identification. In this particular case, the bi-racial (Black and White) children of the Willises, Jenny and Allan, each favor the opposing racial identifiers. Allan, who favors his father's Whiteness, is able to use his racially ambiguous appearance in order to pass solely as White.

At the start of the episode, when Jenny receives news that her brother has returned home from a two-year retreat throughout Europe, Jenny grows silent and stoic. She quickly runs off scene to avoid the situation entirely. When Lionel catches up to her, he addresses her odd behavior, and Jenny speaks indirectly about what's really bothering her as Lionel attempts to lighten the mood.

Jenny: The trouble is, my brother takes after my father.
Lionel: What do you mean? He's White?

[514] Davis, F. James. *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, p. 143.

Jenny: That's exactly what I mean…Well I mean he looks like he's White.
Lionel: Well OK, one of you turned out White and the other turned out lucky (*laughs uncomfortably*). Well… is it maybe that you feel your brother is the one who turned out lucky?

Jenny storms off again, unable to confront her own resentment since she takes after her mother's Blackness. Upon seeing her brother Allan in the next scene, it is notable that he does in fact "take after his father." He is tall, lanky, and has a White skin complexion, yet he still has thick Black curls formed into an Afro, possibly the only physical sign of his Blackness. Even George and Louise find it odd how much more he resembles with his Whiteness. While Louise attempts to avoid the obscurity, George can't help but shout: "I thought a zebra was bad enough. Now we got us a palomino![515]

"'There are niggers who are as white as I am, but taint of blood is there, and we always exclude it.' 'How do you know it is there?' asked Dr. Gresham. 'Oh, there are tricks of blood which always betray them. My eyes are more practiced than yours. I can always tell them. Now, that Johnson is as white as any man; but I knew he was a nigger the moment I saw him. I saw it in his eye.'"[516]

When Jenny and Allan finally come face to face, Jenny gives him the cold shoulder. In his own boisterous way, George sheds light on the uncomfortable tension and forces Allan to see some hard truths. Upon George calling Allan a honkey, the two engage in a face to face heated exchange.

Allan: You know, I knew there was something I missed in Europe, wasn't anybody to feed me those dumb racial cracks.
George: That's because you never showed them your family portrait.

Here, George is making reference to Allan being able to live without anyone questioning whether or not he is Black, they would only know if they happened to look at a family portrait.

[515] A palomino is a genetic color in horses consisting of a gold coat and white mane and tail. The degree of whiteness can vary from white to yellow.

[516] Harper, Frances. *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*. Garrigues Brothers, 1893, p. 229.

When Allan leaves the scene, George continues to force in the last word. "If he had any guts, he wouldn't have hidden out in Europe. He would've been here, with his mother and his sister, with his own kind." Although through his rudeness and candor, George sees early (before it is actually addressed by anyone else) that Allan had escaped America so that he can pass. George directly calls him out on his running away and hiding so that he can live White. When Jenny addresses that George is in fact right about Allan, the stage goes quiet as the camera zooms into a close up of a hurt and disappointed Jenny on the brink of tears.

Later, Helen and Tom are also at a loss regarding their son's two-year hiatus and lack of explanation, however they refuse to address it to him directly. When Jenny and Allan finally come face to face again, Allan questions if Jenny's anger is regarding her history of jealousness towards him and his ability to pass. Still unable to confront her truth, Jenny runs away again, leading both families back into the Jefferson household. Being met with even more snide remarks from George, Allan becomes fed up and attempts to prove himself by initiating "the dozens." As described earlier in this chapter, "The Dozens" is a game of spoken words between two people, common in Black communities, where participants insult each other until one gives up. It's customary for "the dozens" to be played in front of people who act as an audience. A pattern of interactive insults, "the dozens" is evident among all classes of Black people, among males and females, children and adults.[517] George smiles and engages in the challenge. As the two continue to throw verbal jabs at one another, Lionel and Jennifer watch as an audience and are bewildered by Allan's sharp retorts and comment from the side of the game.

Lionel: Your brother can get down when he wants to, he can play some dozens.
Jenny: I didn't know he could do that.

[517] Dollard, John "The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult," in Dundes, Alan (ed.), *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, University Press of Mississippi, 1973, p. 278–279.

The reason behind Allan's initiation of the dozens is explained with clarity by Adrian Piper when she states, "I have sometimes met Blacks who, as a condition of social acceptance of me, require me to prove my Blackness by passing the 'suffering test.'"[518] In an effort to prove that his Blackness is inherent regardless of his skin tone, Allan initiated the game in hopes for gaining respect regarding his cultural and ethnic roots. After the final verbal blow, George and Allan laugh and give each other high and low fives while an impressed George states, "you only half-white, so that makes you half all right." He has secured George's respect and proved that Blackness is within him. With both families present on screen and many still confused about the animosity between Jenny and Allan, again George is the voice of reason that sheds light on the feud. "He [Allan] crossed the color line, he's passing for an ofay, and his sister don't dig it."[519] It is now clear to everyone that Allan has been passing for White and that Jenny is envious towards him for it. Jenny's hurt stems from a belief that since Allan essentially disappeared so long it is because he has a strong repudiation of her and their family. Regarding what is to gain from racial passing Jenny's hurt and confusion comes from a similar lack of understanding that is posed by Adrian Rich when Rich states, "what is harder for me to grasp is how they [people who pass] could want these things enough to sacrifice the history, wisdom, connectedness, and moral solidarity with their family and community in order to get them. It seems to require so much severing and forgetting, so much disowning and distancing, not simply from one's shared past, but from one's former self."[520] A large part of Jenny's envy

[518] Piper, Adrian. "Passing for White, Passing for Black" in *Transition*, No. 58, 1992, p. 6.

[519] An ofay is an informal term used to describe White people.

[520] Piper, Adrian. "Passing for White, Passing for Black" p. 13.

is that she felt forgotten and not good enough in the eyes of her brother, and questions with all that one must risk in order to pass, is it worth it?

Allan makes an important declaration regarding his ability to pass and why he does it. He poses a question to the entire room asking: "Is there anybody here who hasn't wondered just once what it would be like to be White?" In a clear moment of self-reflection everyone remains silent as all of the Black characters come to grips with the truth that the imagination of being White and the privilege that it garners has in fact crossed their minds. Allan has the ability to act on that imagination, so he admits to doing it as a way to escape the painful realities of Blackness in a racially prejudiced America and the treatment he receives once his Blackness is identified. In Allan's eyes, "passing in order to get the benefits you know you deserve may seem the only way to defy the system."[521] Jenny finally expresses the roots of her envy when she tells Allan: "You were the one who had it easy. You went anywhere you wanted. You did what you wanted. Why you?" The unfairness of their physical racial identifiers has festered into a deep-seated resentment of Jenny towards her brother. Albeit, literally always wearing her Blackness on her face has brought Jenny countless forms of discrimination in her life, Allan's ability to pass often left him with a different sense of pain, losing a sense of self and a lack of belonging whilst juggling conflicting identities. Allan explains that in America he had to pass because everyone asked him who he was, while in Europe no one asked him who he was, to a point where he lost himself and no longer knew.

The ability to pass is seen here as a space where one's identity can become lost or un-known—a crippling feeling and critique of a historic practice never before addressed (at this point) on a sitcom platform. Jenny and Allan embrace one another, as they finally feel heard

[521] Ibid.

and understood. Her envy and his lost sense of self requires them to lean on one another as their shared biracial identity brings a plethora of politics of representation that only the two can understand. Asking yourself who you are, and what it means to be able to assume another identity, leaves for a deep self-selection of every character on screen as well as the viewers watching the show. Through complicating the practice of passing and the confines of interracial marriage in the space of a situational comedy, the actors' performances worked to incite an important discussion of identity politics and the Black community. This form of introspection played out on screen and in public proves the power of the imagery and narrative of *The Jeffersons*.

Reflection

Through Tandem Productions in the 1970's, Black images proliferated on network television. The case studies I've discussed in this dissertation (whether through various series, episodes, and/or individual Black artists) suggest many of these Black representations were achieved through resisting the mainstream cooptation of Blackness and are thus transformative in not just the content of these shows but in the individuals employed in television. All of the sitcoms of Tandem Productions are integral in establishing an arc of the racial formation of Blackness in popular television. Before *All in the Family*, sitcoms were predominantly segregated and featured all White casts. *All in the Family* slowly integrated race marginally through its inclusion of the Jefferson family as the Bunker's neighbors. *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times* represented a somewhat separate but [un]equal portrayal of a family as they featured an all-Black cast, but their financial and social circumstances were unequal to their White counterparts. Finally, *The Jeffersons* represented an integrated-privileged model in which although Black characters were in leading roles, *The Jeffersons* featured a racially integrated cast, all

possessing financial privilege. This arc of racial formation is evident in the chronological production of these shows and their spinoffs. Whether through a junkyard tale of a father and son struggling to make it, a loving family stricken with the ills of poverty in the projects, or a nouveau riche family fighting to balance the new lifestyle that wealth has afforded them, these Black sitcoms of Tandem are intertextually connected with the complex political backdrop of television during the 1970's. Tandem's production of *The Jeffersons* slowly crept into what Christine Acham defines as "integrationist themed," as it depicts a Black family entering a space of upward mobility that is usually reserved for the White elite. *The Jeffersons* hinted to the end of an era of all-Black casted sitcoms where the struggles and culture of Blackness are at the center.[522]

Diff'rent Strokes

Although Tandem Productions grew much of its critical acclaim through its Black sitcoms, the last popular television show to feature Black characters at Tandem took a form drastically counter to its predecessors (yet, also reminiscent of *All in the Family*). In 1978, Tandem Productions debuted *Diff'rent Strokes* (1978-1986). The series starred Gary Coleman and Todd Bridges as Arnold and Willis Jackson respectively, two Black boys from Harlem who are taken in by a rich Park Avenue-living White businessman and widower named Phillip Drummond (Conrad Bain) and his daughter Kimberly (Dana Plato), for whom the boy's deceased mother previously worked. Moving from a Watts salvage yard, to the Chicago projects, to an Upper

[522] Acham, Christine. *Revolution Televised*, p. 171.
"Integrationist themed" shows indicate the integrating face of African American representation at the end of the 1970s. Shows in which Black casts literally integrate on screen with White ones, as well as shows featuring Black characters in which their Blackness is somewhat muted, giving credence to the idea that racial divisions do not exist (i.e. *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992)).

Eastside Manhattan high-rise apartment, the last sitcom of Tandem Production's as a company placed Black boys in a penthouse on Park Avenue. The show was a parable of integration. But although *Diff'rent Strokes* starred two young Black actors, the leading character in the credits is a White man (Conrad Bain), whose vantage point the show often adopts. Bud Yorkin, in fact, describes how he conceived the idea for the show after seeing actor Beau Bridges' interactions with his newly adopted Black son.

Yorkin wanted the show to "put a Black child into a White man's world" (the same construction he used for *The Jeffersons*) and discuss the various woes the White father and Black child deal with in their daily lives.[523] Perhaps it is not a surprise that in a show featuring Black children the resistance and agency from Black actors as was less prominent than in previous Tandem sitcoms. *Diff'rent Strokes* was, like *All in the Family*, a mixed cast show. But unlike *All in the Family,* there was a Black showrunner and had prominent characters of both Black and White races. Even with the inclusion of one of the first Black television show runners and directors, Gerren Keith, overseeing all phases of production on *Diff'rent Strokes*, because of its efforts of racial integration and harmony, the show lacked the upfront Blackness portrayed in previous Tandem sitcoms. Like the Black actors and writers discussed throughout this dissertation, with his seeming position of power on the set, Keith himself bemoans his place in the television industry as still being a consistent struggle when he stated, "because the vestiges of racism have not been erased from the entertainment industry…I'm not allowed to think I'm a *director*. I'm a *Black* director."[524]

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[523] "Bud Yorkin," *Television Academy Foundation Interviews.*

[524] *Ebony Magazine*, "Introducing: Gerren Keith, Dynamic Director oversees all phases of *Diff'rent Strokes*," Dec. 1982.

Although the title of the *Ebony* article indicates Keith's agency on *Diff'rent Strokes*, Keith's quote contradicts the power of said agency. Keith's quote helps to make clear that the consistent debate around Black representation on television, as addressed earlier in this dissertation, in Phillip Brian Harper's discussion of simulacral vs. mimetic realism, is simply not enough.[525] Rather than being a battle of the amount of Black people seen versus realism in their characterizations, I believe the true agency wielded through Black representations exists with the merging of simulacral realism, mimetic realism, and what I call, authoritative realism. The idea of authoritative realism exists when Black creators have a position and sense of ownership to their artistry. In terms of television, this authority of course has levels of hierarchy, for instance, a stake in the writing opposed to production, directing, or even holding an executive position within a network. As seen with *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons* possessing simulacral and mimetic realism, their shows were greatly received in their address of the collective portrayals of hustle economics, Black women, and social issues of the time. However, without authority over their characterizations, Black artists of these shows were often at odds with the White authority figures, leading to lawsuits, cancellations, firings, and poor-quality episodes. In contrast, *Diff'rent Strokes*, having an authoritative realism with Gerren Keith at the helm of this show as its director and show runner, had the potential of groundbreaking Black representation, however through its integrationist themes it lacked the familiar

[525] Harper, Phillip Brian. "Extra-Special Effects: Televisual Representation and the Claims of 'the Black Experience.'" Simulacral realism is representation that "would improve the objective conditions characterizing daily life for the mass of African Americans living within the scope of television's influence." This term describes popular demands for greater representation of Blacks on TV, regardless of their roles, to improve their social status. On the other hand, he identifies the contradictory demand for relevance or "mimetic realism…whereby television would 'reflect' the social reality on which it was implicitly modeled." While problematizing each of these demands, Harper calls for the merging of the two.

simulacral and mimetic realism in terms of Blackness as its predecessors had. This shift is possibly what forced *Diff'rent Strokes* to never break into the top-10 in Nielsen ratings, never matching up to the fame of the previous sitcoms featuring Black people at Tandem.[526]

[526] Brooks, Tim; Marsh, Earle (2007). *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present* (Ninth Edition).

Chapter 5: Conclusion: Authoritative Realism and Mining Our Roots

Through this dissertation I chose to give voice to Tandem Production's Black actors, writers, and producers of the 1970's and to put them at the forefront of the various politics of representation they were forced to contend with on screen and behind the scenes at Tandem Productions, within the larger network system, and in society. In taking to task the struggles of hustle economics, Black gender norms and expectations, and political and social dissent, these individuals were forced to contend with racism and ill-treatment at the hands of Hollywood executives, putting themselves and their careers on the line in order to contribute to the imagination of what Blackness can be on television. As chronicled in this dissertation, the history of the Black sitcoms of Tandem Productions is one that takes different forms in each show. However, the situation in each show revolves around class, race, and gender in complex, layered formulations. I used this dissertation to show how the Black artists of each of these shows practiced various forms of agency and resilience through hustle economics, gender, and dissent to work to transform the television industry. Of course, some efforts were larger and more successful than others.

In Chapter 2's discussion of *Sanford and Son*, the plight of Black economics, even with access to business ownership, was stagnant and showed that Black people required various forms of trickery and hustle to get by to the next day. With the introduction of Black women as reoccurring cast members (such as Lynn Hamilton and LaWanda Page) and Black writers being hired more frequently (such as Ilunga Addell, Paul Mooney, Richard Pryor, and Odie Hawkins), *Sanford and Son* not only added a political and social depth to its narratives, but it also became a haven for Black stand-up comedians to enter the mainstream and be introduced to more diverse audiences. Using his agency as the most popular actor at NBC, to advocate for

better roles for Black actors, a higher salary, and a greater stake in the writing of these narratives, Redd Foxx spoke out against the executive team at Tandem Productions and even walked out of the show until his demands were met. Remaining resilient through threats of cancellation and being written out of the show, much of Foxx's demands were met and his fight for redeeming the Black image led to three more successful seasons of *Sanford and Son*.

Chapter 3's analysis of *Good Times,* makes evident that the Black artists of this show, due to the content, required more of its cast to utilize spaces, such as the Black press, to speak about the changes they wished to see in the content they portrayed. As a sitcom that chronicled a Black family dealing with the woes of living in the projects, various forms of informal economies were shown on-screen to be practiced in efforts to keep their heads above water. Knowing that the Evans' family represented the image of the Black family at large, in response, Esther Rolle consistently challenged Norman Lear to make necessary changes in story content and dialogue that allowed for the family to be portrayed in a light that was less reliant on buffoonery and get-rich-quick schemes. Using her role to push past the histories of Black women as "grinning domestics," Rolle demanded for her on-screen family to have a working husband and a family that is not dependent on White people. Also, her colleague John Amos, went to greater lengths of dissent against Tandem executives as he wrote a clause into his contract that required a higher wage and writing credit—so that he too could be at the table to write more dialogue that took advantage of the positive potential that *Good Times* had for television and America. With much of the production team recycling unsatisfactory images of comic relief at the expense of the character J.J., Amos continued to be absent from table reads and meetings in protest. Fighting for what he believes in, this protest unfortunately led to Tandem executives writing Amos out of the show. On the production side, when co-creator and writer Eric Monte

sought a greater stake in day to day show operations and a higher wage because he saw the degradation of the show's Black characters he created, he sued Tandem Productions. Although a settlement was made, Monte was essentially blacklisted from television jobs and credits.

Finally, in Chapter 4's analysis of *The Jeffersons*, agency and resilience of Black artists yet again took another form. *The Jeffersons* is a sitcom whose content is regarding wealth and Black ascension, add to this the introduction of White supporting cast members, *The Jefferson's* less controversial content saw little dissent between Black artists and Tandem executives. The Jefferson family didn't face financial troubles like their Black sitcom predecessors, however, their particular predicament of being Black and nouveau riche amongst a mostly all-White social space, left the Jefferson family in a conflicting space of economic displacement. They weren't Black enough for the ghetto, and they weren't White enough to be respected amongst the elite, an often precarious place for George Jefferson who was frequently placed between these conflicting identities. Yet, *The Jeffersons* was transformative in its diverse depiction of Black women. May it be the nouveau riche Louise, the old money Helen, or the ghetto maid Florence, *The Jeffersons* showed that Black women can occupy multiple spaces in America and on television. At the helm of the characterization of Black women on this show was Isabel Sanford, who denied the common Sapphire characterization, and portrayed Louise as a woman who transcended traditional labels of Black womanhood. Although dissent with Tandem executives is seen the least on *The Jeffersons*, there were instances in which the Black actors were able to add input into the dialogue, jokes, and direction of the shows. Largely, the conflict that received the most attention in the early seasons of the show was the interracial marriage of Helen and Tom Willis (Roxie Roker and Franklin Cover, respectively). Amidst threats of violence and cancellation, particularly Roxie Roker, the actors practiced resilience in the face of

ill-mannered comments and hate speech that they would receive through daily mail and correspondence.

Although different in each show, these Black artists used their agency in multiple ways that are important to the history of television production, and it took the resilience of each of these artists to make way for artists of the future. These are individuals who sacrificed and held their tongues to the system at Tandem Productions and the varying networks, in turn making these systems billions of dollars. However, these individuals continuously fade into the periphery in discussion of television history and media change makers and none of these individuals hold the honor of a star on the coveted Hollywood Walk of Fame. Whether through a junkyard tale of a father and son struggling to make it, a loving family stricken with the ills of poverty in the projects, or a nouveau riche family fighting to balance their new lifestyle that wealth has afforded them, these Black sitcoms of Tandem are intertextually connected to describe a temporal politics that took place in television during the 1970's, and the Black artists who were a part of this vision deserve recognition. Moving throughout the chapters of this dissertation some things clearly evolve and change at Tandem, while many stayed the same. For instance, broadening the definition Black economics and access to specific roles/power of Black women in these White patriarchal spaces become more expansive at Tandem. Unfortunately, what seemed to stay largely the same through Tandem's history are the ways in which Black artists contend with authenticity in their portrayals and how these artists expressed dissent with Tandem executives. These Black artists' sacrifices were the impetus to future Black artists struggling within the confines of network conventions on race and identity. However, in terms of the larger television industry, history has shown that when a Black person possesses authoritative power, their power is always overshadowed by the often White executive control of censorship. The dissent of Tandem's Black artists of the 1970's, on screen and off, is a history that must be

highlighted in discussions of media history as these Black artists and Black bodies have largely failed to be properly historicized in scholarly texts. The focus is often on the White executives who have won numerous awards and accolades for their portrayals of Black images, but what about the Black artists responsible for performing these images and having the unrequested burden of defining their race?

Thanks to contemporary Black artists making nods to Black television's past, we are reminded that the disruptive work of these Black sitcoms of the past are integral to how we understand and watch television today. Although Hollywood's system of awards is also historically racially biased, another topic that exist outside the scope of this work, even the exclusion of these 1970's Black sitcom artists from Hollywood's Walk of Fame was met with resilience and pride. As the inclusion on the Hollywood Walk of Fame is one of the most enduring and honored symbols of celebrity around, there is another, much smaller, and all but forgotten monument to another group of celebrities simply etched into the cement outside of the former office building of Redd Foxx Productions. Although this "Redd Foxx Walk of Fame" is not officially recognized by any commemorative markers, in front of a modern office building at 933 North La Brea in West Hollywood, CA exists signatures, dates, and hand/footprints left by Foxx, Lynn Hamilton, LaWanda Page, and other Black actors and comedians popularized in the 1970's. In a 1987 *Jet* article, ten years after the cancellation of *Sanford and Son*, Redd Foxx is seen holding the hand of his former co-star LaWanda Page, as she presses her feet into the wet cement and smiles at this momentous occasion.[527] Rejecting Hollywood's markers of valida-

[527] Sutton, Issac, *Jet*, 10/19/1987, p. 42.

tion, these Black artists scratched through years of industry discontent and silenced voices, survived a myriad of battles regarding an authentic Black representation, to proudly historicize themselves.



Figure 21 LaWanda Page and Redd Foxx historicize themselves

Fortunately, Black sitcoms after Tandem moved (at least somewhat) towards a merging of the aforementioned simulacral, mimetic, and authoritative realism. In this vein, I would be remiss to not mention Bill Cosby and his control of Black sitcoms in the 1980s. Chiefly through the self-titled *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), Bill Cosby created and produced a show about an upper middle-class Black family. With an all-Black cast *The Cosby Show* challenged head-on the notion of Black people stuck in poverty or having working class angst. As Sut

Jhally and Justin Lewis argue, although *The Cosby Show* promoted "an attitude of racial tolerance among White viewers and generated a feeling of intense pride among Black viewers," the show was also a site of negative ramifications.[528] The politics of respectability the show promoted through its "pick yourself up by your boot straps" mentality and it's often silence of racial divisions, hint that such divisions do not exist, making *The Cosby Show* an integral part of the process of public disenlightenment. Even with such seemingly squandered potential for a Black representation that is fluid and expansive, *The Cosby Show* was within the top-10 of Nielsen ratings in seven of its eight seasons, and spent five consecutive seasons as the number one show, till this day tied only with *All in the Family*.[529] With Black viewers being proud to be seen on screen and White viewers accepting *The Cosby Show's* distance from racial conflict, it was and is deemed acceptable and stands as the most highly discussed Black sitcom in television history culturally and scholarly. To this day Bill Cosby arguably stands as the most influential Black man in television history through the *at least* decade-long reign of his sitcoms, films, cartoons, and stand-up comedy. Although Cosby more closely addressed the fluidity of Blackness and its forms in *The Cosby Show* spinoff *A Different World* (1987-1993), which focused on a range of Black student's experiences at a historically Black university, the authoritative power he possessed in framing Black representations in various medias was tarnished in the mid-2010's when more than sixty women accused Cosby of various forms of sexual assault over the span of his career.

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[528] Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*, Routledge, 1992, pp.132-136.

[529] Brooks, Tim; Marsh, Earle (2007). *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946-Present* (Ninth Edition).

Much like the shift that took place in the Black content in 1970's sitcoms, following the overwhelming success of Cosby in the 1980's, when television extended from the three major networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC), an unprecedented shift took place in television history: White executives turned to Black dollars as a way of salvaging network profits lost in the war against video cassettes and cable television. Not only were Black viewers watching disproportionately more network television than the general population but, they preferred Black shows. As a result, Black producers, writers, directors, and actors were given an unusual degree of creative control at the Fox Network, Warner Bros. (WB), and the United Paramount Network (UPN). They created groundbreaking sitcoms and sketch comedy such as *In Living Color* (1990-1994), *Martin* (1992-1997), *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990-1996), *Roc* (1991-1994), *Living Single* (1993-1998), and more. What emerged were radical representations of Black memory and experience. While Black sitcoms during this period may seem trivial or buffoonish to some, they have deep-rooted ties to Black protest literature and are often autobiographical and shaped by a desire for social transformation. However, even when Black people gain creative control, they are still forced under the supremacy of White network executives to often portray images of White popular opinion. For Fox, viewing habits between White and Black households changed and networks began to shift their focus, yet again, away from Black audiences in their transition to "must see TV" in popular White-casted shows like *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) and *Friends* (1994-2004). With Fox no longer willing to deal with such hyperblackness on television, many of these shows were forced to early cancellations, taking the niche networks of WB and UPN down with them.

From the astonishing number of all-Black cast sitcoms of the 1990's, the 2000's reverted back to more subtle modes of Black representation on television, seen in such family sitcoms like *The Bernie Mac Show* (2001-2006), *My Wife and Kids* (2001-2005), and *Everybody*

Hates Chris (2005-2009). Although created and produced by stand-up comedians Bernie Mac, Damon Wayans, and Chris Rock, respectively, who are known for their raw and unabashed humor on the working class Black experience, these sitcoms often toe the line of using their comedy to discuss racial and class disparities, in order to remain in line with what is popularly accepted on network television. Through this often complicated history of Black representation on network television, what drew me to reflect back and focus on the content of shows and dissent of Black artists in the 1970's for this dissertation, were the ways in which I began to see various successful shows in general, and Black sitcoms specifically, self-consciously mine their roots and pay homage to a period of Black televisual transformation. Slowly given increased access to the power of authoritative realism, Black artists have used imitations of the Black bodies and storylines of Tandem's Black sitcoms and have reimagined and reintroduced them into the contemporary mainstream. Whether through Jordan Peele and Keegan Michael-Key's parody of *Sanford and Son* in the sketch comedy series *Mad TV* (1995-2009, 2016), the cast of *The Bernie Mac Show* being photographed in 2005 as tribute to a 1974 *TV Guide* cover of *Good Times* characters, to Sherman Hemsley, Isabel Sanford, and Marla Gibbs crossing over into contemporary Black sitcoms portraying their characters from *The Jeffersons* in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* (2007-2012), contemporary Black artists have consciously nodded to the Black actors and sitcoms of Tandem Productions and their inspirational legacy.[530]

[530] *Mad TV*, Season 11 Episode 5 11/12/2005.
TV Guide, 10/09/2005.
The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, Season 5 Episode 17, "Will is from Mars," 02/20/1995.
Tyler Perry's House of Payne, Season 8 Episode 10, "Curtis Jefferson" 11/18/2011.

Presently, the network sitcom *Black-ish* (ABC, 2014-) is a very successful current show that is self-consciously mining its Black roots. *Black-ish* has been a rarity among broadcast sitcoms in recent years—drawing solid ratings and robust critical praise, particularly for episodes addressing complex social issues, much like its 1970's predecessors. When it premiered in 2014, *Black-ish* was the first broadcast sitcom in years to feature an all-Black family.[531] In its season two finale entitled, "Good-ish Times," *Black-ish* paid tribute to *Good Times* by transporting the L.A.-based Johnson family back in time to inner-city Chicago as *Good Times* characters. In a *TV Guide* interview with *Black-ish* creator and showrunner Kenya Barris, he states that, "forty years ago, the Evans family was *the* Black family on TV…Creating this parallel was something I've always wanted to do."[532] The cast, many of whom hadn't been born during *Good Times'* original run, "binged episodes on YouTube" to understand the content and performance of these Black characters in the 1970s.[533] One cast member even said they were "surprised to see how much it pulled on heartstrings and dealt with heavy issues, which is something that our show does too."[534] With *Black-ish*, it seems that what was once old has become new again, in regards to popular Black network sitcoms using comedy to address societal mores, race, and politics. The large difference is the creative freedom and authority to portray Black characters that was given to Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin as White men. With authoritative realism coming to fruition, a Black man (like Kenya Barris) being in creative control of

[531] To highlight its critical acclaim, *Black-ish* has been nominated for 12 Primetime Emmy Awards over its run, and this year received its third Emmy nomination for outstanding comedy series. It received a Peabody Award in 2016, and a Golden Globe Award in 2017 for actress Tracee Ellis Ross.

[532] Ratledge, Ingela, "*Black-ish* Lets the *Good Times* Roll" in *TV Guide*, 05/09/2016.

[533] Ibid.

[534] Ibid.

such a sitcom would seem to be the answer to a history of network television politics stifling the Black voice, however Barris was also forced to contend with network constraints.

In 2018, Kenya Barris departed from ABC Studios due to creative differences. This departure was due in large part to the fact that ABC had indefinitely shelved and episode of *Black-ish* that he wrote and directed. The episode, "Please, Baby, Please," touched on current events, including the controversy over athletes kneeling during the national anthem, and (of greater concern to ABC) criticism of President Donald Trump.[535] These creative blockades to what would be important societal critiques on television, pushed Barris to depart from ABC and sign with Netflix, effectively forcing him to resign from his position as co-showrunner on *Black-ish* to an executive producer role. Barris' three-year $100 million overall deal with the subscription-based streaming service Netflix will see him produce original content exclusively for Netflix, similar to his former ABC colleague Shonda Rhimes and her transition to Netflix. As traditional network broadcast companies are more restricting in content from the perspective of people of color, what attracts current Black artists to Netflix is its promise of creative freedom. With Barris' transition in mind, Netflix's Vice President of Original Content Acquisition, Cindy Holland, had this to say, "his [Barris'] honesty, comedic brilliance, and singular point of view, combined with the creative freedom he will enjoy at Netflix, promises to create powerful new stories for all our members around the world."[536] Not having to align with network television's restrictions of content in production, Netflix is slowly turning into a safe space for Black artists, critically engaging media, and societal critique.

[535] Holloway, Daniel, "Kenya Barris Signs $100 Million Netflix Deal" in *Variety* 08/16/2018.

[536] Ibid.

Even when network executive changes seem to be moving in a direction that reflects the diversity of American society and people of color are put into positions of authority to tell their stories, traditional network standards and wealthy White elite on top seem to always have the final say. In February of 2019, Channing Dungey, the first Black person to run one of the big four networks as the President of ABC Entertainment, also made the move to Netflix to serve as its Vice President of Original Content, reuniting her with former ABC Black artists, Shonda Rhimes and Kenya Barris. With regards to her move to Netflix, Dungey commented that, "I'm drawn to the forward-thinking, risk-taking, and creative culture at Netflix."[537] Through the statements of both Barris and Dungey, it can be determined that their place in the network system was not only stifled, but lacked forward-thinking in the content and storylines they produced. Looking back on writer-producer talent of the 1970s, like Ilunga Addell and Eric Monte for instance, without the existence of new media outlets such as Netflix, they were often forced to contend with the ways in which Tandem Productions and the traditional networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC) ran their businesses or, like in Eric Monte's case, be blacklisted from the industry.

Like the Black sitcom actor's (Redd Foxx, Esther Rolle, John Amos, Isabel Sanford, etc.) consistent contention with network and production politics regarding the Black image in the 1970s, Black star power and network control is still met with controversy today as networks attempt to suppress Black actor's creativity and critique. For instance, comedian Dave Chappelle's sketch comedy *Chappelle's Show* (2003-2006), in which he created and starred in, ran for two critically successful seasons on Comedy Central. However, at the supposed start of the third season, Chappelle walked away from the show. His motives weren't revealed until later

[537] Andreeva, Nellie, "Channing Dungey Joins Netflix As VP Original Content, Will Work With Shonda Rhimes, The Obamas & Others" in *Deadline Hollywood*, 12/17/2018.

when Chappelle claims that he was in a constant battle with Comedy Central regarding his content. With his success, he felt that he was in a trap that ultimately impacted his creativity and peace of mind.[538] That constant fatigue of battle brought content to his show that he didn't find favorable, and even with Comedy Central dangling a $50 million deal for him to finish the third season, Chappelle denied and *Chappelle's Show* is now a memory of what could've been. Similarly, the comedian Jerrod Carmichael created and starred in his sitcom *The Carmichael Show* (2015-2017), which served as a semi-autobiographical account of Carmichael and his family. With its potential as another contemporary Black sitcom that tackled uncomfortable present-day realities and current events in a humorous context, *The Carmichael Show* generally received positive reviews for its original, smart, and crafty comedy. However, the freedom at which Carmichael was able to discuss such provocative content was halted by NBC executives in his season 3 episode, "Shoot-Up-Able". In this episode, we don't see a mass shooting, however, audiences witness Carmichael's character (himself as Jerrod) surviving a mass shooting physically unharmed but psychologically scarred. On June 14th, 2017, after mass shootings in Virginia and San Francisco, NBC pulled the episode before it could air due to its sensitive nature as it fell on a day of two real-life mass shootings. In an interview from Carmichael, the network's decision was publicly criticized as "criminal," as he believes it does a disservice to not face such an issue head on and talk about these tragedies in a meaningful way to create important dialogue for healing.[539] Eventually, NBC aired the episode weeks later, however, it is this moment of pushback within in the confines of a larger network that left Carmichael feeling stifled and soon led to him leaving his own show at the end of that season. Both Carmichael

[538] Dave Chappelle interviewed by Gayle King, *CBS This Morning*, 03/20/2017.

[539] "Jerrod Carmichael on the Sensitivities of Gun Violence on TV." *Chelsea*. Netflix. 06/14/2017.

and Chappelle were forced to find creative solace in spaces outside of the network system where they can more freely critique and question the ills of the political and social moment. Carmichael's departure led him to his HBO stand up special, *Jerrod Carmichael: 8* (2017), and Dave Chappelle's led him to four stand up specials on Netflix (*Deep in the Heart of Texas: Dave Chappelle Live at Austin City Limits*, *The Age of Spin: Dave Chappelle Live at the Hollywood Palladium*, *Dave Chappelle: Equanimity*, and *Dave Chappelle: The Bird Revelation* all released in 2017), for which he made upwards of $100 million.[540]

Through these various examples, original Black content and Black artists who create it seem to be consistently pushed away by the traditional network system. Black authority over their television in the network space is arguably only superficial. With all of these recent Netflix deals of acquiring Black artistry and individuals from network broadcast, it begs the question if Netflix (and other subscription or pay television formats such as; Amazon, Hulu, HBO, etc.) will become more like broadcast or if they are actually capable of making critically subversive creative fare? As that is a question for another study, these examples throughout have made it clear that whether in the 1970's or presently, the network system has always been a space of contention for Black artists and the recognition for their artistry is overwhelmingly scant. With new media and technology giving Black artists more of a reality in terms of authority in their television creations, it is difficult to predict the fate of Black television in general and Black sitcoms specifically in the network system.

On May 22nd, 2019, television personality Jimmy Kimmel and (the now 96-year-old) Norman Lear hosted and executive produced an ABC 90-minute live production of *All in the*

[540] Hyman, Dan, "Dave Chappelle on Trump, Cosby, and His Netflix Deal" in *The New York Times*, 03/17/2017.

Family and *The Jeffersons*. *Live in Front of a Studio Audience: Norman Lear's All in the Family and The Jeffersons*, featured contemporary actors remaking one original script from each of the shows. The star-studded event stemmed from a two-year, first-look deal that Lear signed with the studio in July 2018.[541] Albeit, a few mishaps in dialogue and exaggerations of characters, the live performance received great reception and of course tons of laughter. What was so great about this event is that the contemporary actors read original scripts from the 1970's—words that largely remain relevant today.

The Jefferson's episode that Lear and company chose to remake is the very first episode of the series, one that I analyzed in Chapter 4, "A Friend in Need." The episode featured Jamie Foxx as George Jefferson, Wanda Sykes as Louise Jefferson, Javon Adepo as Lionel Jefferson, Kerry Washington as Helen Willis, Will Ferrell as Tom Willis, Amber Stevens West as Jenny Willis, Stephen Tobowloski as Harry Bentley, Jackée Harry as Diane, and Fran Bennet as Mother Jefferson. With such a great ensemble, along with singer Jennifer Hudson doing a live rendition of the classic "Movin' On Up," it truly felt as though the audience was being transported back to 1975 and that deluxe apartment in the sky. What sparked large controversy, however, was the casting of Latina actress Justina Machado as the Jefferson's legendary maid, Florence Johnston (originally played by Marla Gibbs). In fact, due to the racial impact of the iconic line that Florence delivers at the end of this episode, "How come we overcame and nobody told me?"[542] the stars playing these roles, particularly Jamie Foxx, moved to have the role re-casted as they felt it would be a disservice to not have a Black woman speak these words.[543]

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[541] Goldberg, Lesley, "Sony Eyes Other Norman Lear Reboots in New TV Deal with Iconic Producer" The Hollywood Reporter, 07/27/2018.

[542] See page 238.

[543] Anonymous, May 23rd, 2019.

To the audience's surprise, during the live show, when the door was knocked at the Jefferson's home, in walked 88-year-old Marla Gibbs, reprising her role as Florence Johnston. Being met with a groundswell of praise live in the studio and via social media, Gibbs' presence hearkened back to the dynamic impact she made forty-four years ago. In this effort to pay homage to the legacy of *The Jeffersons* and Black actors of this period, these contemporary actors not only participated in this live event, but they used their agency to do their due diligence and make sure that the episode was done right in the honor of those that led the way for them. With events such as this and with future remakes on the horizon, it is clear that network television is attempting to mine at its cultural roots with regard to the shows that redefined the medium. Similar to the work done by these contemporary actors, I hope this dissertation helps to pay homage to a legacy of Black artists whose resilience made way for how we all see television today.

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