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Television and Children: Issues in Black and White

Cover Page Footnote

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REBECCA ABBOTT

*Television and Children:
Issues of Black and White*

Among the experiences of childhood in America are the almost unavoidable, typically lengthy encounters with television. Given the fact that an average American school-aged child watches around thirty hours of television every week,¹ filling over 30% of his or her waking hours, it is impossible to conclude that this experience is benign. Sociologists and psychologists clearly don't. But apart from their many studies identifying the generally negative effects television has on children's cognitive development, a more fundamental cause for alarm lies in the relationship between television and its insidious effects on individual and cultural identity. Television is a thoroughly commercial industry which has been chronically impaired by racial bias. Its representations of people who are not white has been extremely problematic. How do the experiences of television affect children's developing perceptions of themselves, especially children who are not white? And how do the modes of television production contribute to these perceptions?

The structures of commercial television within the American culture industry confirm, not surprisingly, the domination of existing white power interests. Applying this perspective after a half-century of TV broadcasting in America, and considering the extent that these power interests no longer speak to the historical process in America, we should expect to hear voices of opposition. Because television has traditionally embraced the solipsistic world view of white men, it offers a xenomorphic experience of American culture for viewers who are different, pushing them either to accommodate or to resist. The experience itself must be like W.E.B. Du Bois' articulation of African Americans' perceptions of themselves in this country, which he describes as a ``double _____

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consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that

looks on in amused contempt and pity."² It is tempting to read Du Bois' "tape" as videotape.

For Stuart Hall, the formation of identity is a "production," which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall echoes Du Bois as he explores Caribbean cultural identity and "the traumatic character of 'the colonial experience' . . . They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as 'Other' . . . This inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms. If its silences are not resisted, they produce, in Fanon's vivid phrase, 'individuals without an anchor.'"³ In this call for resistance, the imagery of anchors anticipates Paul Gilroy's metaphor of ships on the Black Atlantic which was "continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people — not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy and citizenship." In *The Black Atlantic* Gilroy also evokes Du Bois and asks: "How has this doubleness, what Richard Wright calls the dreadful objectivity which follows from being both inside and outside the West, affected the conduct of political movements against racial oppression and towards black autonomy?"⁴ This is also the question to ask of cultural production. Doubleness, the sense of being other, split, and adrift, is the dominant image that television has reflected to viewers who are not part of the white mainstream. Some forms of resistance have emerged, but the strength of their opposition and their unique impact on children is open to question.

Because of the varied roles that television plays in American culture and the countless number of experiences it provides for children, it seems useful to take the advice of Ien Ang, who argues in an essay on the political nature of television observation "that an analysis of a text must be combined with an analysis of its social conditions of existence" by employing both semiotic and sociological methods.⁵ Sociologists have been attempting to measure television's effects on viewers since the 1950s, and while many of these studies suffer from "an over-simplistic idea of communication as the transmission of transparent messages from and to fully autonomous subjects,"⁶ they can provide a grounded context in which to locate the meanings of television's representations.

Television's Effects on Children from a Sociological Perspective

All efforts to distinguish children's programs from the rest of TV fare are confounded by the fact that children generally watch everything. The Children's Television Act of 1990 was a belated and seriously compromised effort to encourage broadcasters to acknowledge this fact and regulate themselves. Its twin prescriptions for general audience programs with educational value for children and for programs tailored especially for children's educational and informational needs were legislated with no guidelines on how much to air, when to air it, and how broadcasters should report their compliance.⁷ Saturday morning viewers have seen incremental changes – less product-oriented programming, a little less violence (Mighty Morphin Power Rangers notwithstanding), a few new shows with quasi-educational content, more ethnically and racially diverse casting – and for the past several years networks made the 8 to 9 P.M. prime-time slot into “family hour.” The major networks are planning to abandon family hour programming this coming fall, though, and whatever significance the remaining changes have must be considered in light of the fact that Saturday and weekday morning television is not what most children are watching.

In an influential essay published in 1979, George Comstock and Robin Cobbey make strong assertions about children's television viewing habits. “None of the innovations appended to commercial broadcasting to date – public television, cable, Children's Television Workshop – have altered two facts: the public principally views commercial broadcast television, and children principally view television prepared for general audiences.”⁸ A 1978 study appearing in the *Journal of Advertising Research* on black children's responses to television advertising sounds a similar note. “Early prime-time/after school and prime-time hours [6-9 P.M.] accounted for the bulk of viewing, followed at quite a distance by before-school viewing and Saturday-morning viewing.”⁹ Any doubt about those findings can be dispelled by watching the array of advertisements appealing to children – ads for video games, children's breakfast cereals, soda and candy products for kids – which pop up all evening long.

Children's response to what they see is influenced by their age. One of many collections of sociological studies on television's effects

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on children's development, a compilation entitled *Television and the Developing Child* reiterates frequently that pre-school children tend to believe what they see on television (if it's not animation); they think TV is real. Very young children believe that even animation is real. Moreover, researchers consistently find that young children usually can't distinguish between programs and ads, and don't understand what advertisements are:

They are also less aware that some content is intended to sell them toys and breakfast cereal, rather than entertain or inform them. Older children do better than preschoolers and younger children in all of these areas, but they are still not processing and understanding what they view on television in the same way adults do.¹⁰

Some studies have focused on differences in viewing patterns between white and non-white children. For instance, the further white children live from urban areas, the more they learn from TV about African Americans. "Approximately two-fifths of [a 1977 study sample of] nearly 1000 white children reported TV as their main source of information about black people . . . the importance of TV as a source increased as direct contact with blacks decreased."¹¹ (Given the fact that African Americans have been working in the homes of whites since the beginning of slavery, one would *not* expect the converse of these findings to be true.) This data obviously contributes to the many profound implications of television's racial stereotypes.

While several studies found that "minority children on the average spend more time watching television than do white children," and that "minority children seem to ascribe more reality or credibility to television portrayals than do white children of the same age,"¹² the reasons for these findings are explained in varying ways. For instance, Comstock and Cobbey make the valuable observation that despite some claims that "blacks, exclusive of differences in educational level, were less integrated into the 'book culture,'" claims which sound disturbingly vague and racist, they emphasize that the "political adaptation" explanation holds that the civil rights movement inspired information-seeking beneficial to television because the movement

followed shortly after the medium's rise to prominence."¹³ In other words, because television coverage of the civil rights movement presented a more realistic and compelling portrayal of racial issues than print ever had before, it gained sympathy among black viewers as a medium of information and so became more trusted and valued. The authors nonetheless found that "both black elementary and black high school students from families of lower socioeconomic status more often cited learning as a motive for viewing and more frequently agreed that television portrays life accurately, than did white peers of similar socioeconomic status."¹⁴

Whether a child is wealthy or poor seems to have a powerful effect on his or her relationship to television for a number of reasons. Correlations between the educational level of children's parents, their relative affluence, and parental involvement in children's education implies that children from middle or upper-middle class families will have more literate parents who will intervene more actively in their television experiences. Those authors from *The Journal of Advertising Research* found this to be true, and as a consequence of studying the ways poor urban black children respond to ads became concerned that "without the ability to understand the manipulative and biased approach taken by advertisers, millions of younger [poor] black children may well be vulnerable to the influence of commercials." The authors made a plea for advertiser responsibility, which seemed unusual in the context of a trade journal:

If children begin to discover that to be lied to is a large part of what the adult world is all about, their skepticism may lead to cynicism . . . Black children from poverty environments would seem especially sensitive to such processes that tell them "Surprise, we never said we were telling the truth."¹⁵

An interesting aspect of these researchers' work revealed that a few of the children in their study had taken part in classroom "television literacy" sessions. Those children learned what advertisements — and the motives of the sponsors — were.

The Commercial Corporate Structure of TV

Advertising, of course, is the engine that drives the commercial television industry. During its nascent years when television was monopolized by the "big three" network broadcasting, several structural factors consolidated white, male, middle- to upper-middle-class programming imperatives. Initially the organizational practices of television business encouraged the hiring and promotion of "like" individuals — i.e. white, college educated men — who, working from a white, moneyed perspective, conceived of programming that arose from their world view.¹⁶ This organizational system dovetailed with the stresses of commercial competition, whose pressures led producers — in the interests of preventing viewers from changing channels — to the universal strategy of adopting "least objectionable programming," or L.O.P. Sponsors (businesses with similar all-white-male environments) required that their TV programs appeal to strong, stable markets, so it is easy to see why broadcasting executives seldom ventured from a *Father Knows Best* universe. In this respect, "[b]ecause programme suppliers (many of whom are former network executives) sell primarily to the three major networks, their products are structured on the basis of what they think will make it through the network selection process."¹⁷ Wober and Gunter, in *Television and Social Control*, recognize the force that millions of dollars in revenue, riding on even a single ratings point, has in solidifying the appeal of the least common denominator. "Television thus sets an ideal of white, affluent, middle-class, male-dominated society, and expresses this ideal in different ways in all its genres."¹⁸

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's impassioned condemnation of American mass media's function of serving "to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity," laid out in their book *Manufacturing Consent*, is as applicable to intra-national representations of race as it is to the international political concerns it chiefly addresses. They identify powerful "filters" which constrain, shape, and modify the flow of information into American homes and minds, such as the cost of doing business — and the urgent need for profitability — in an age of hostile corporate takeovers and self-induced debt; the controlling influence of the few groups or families which own most media companies' stock; and the commercial framework of broadcasting which all but rules out

competition from non-commercial, and hence non-mainstream, media producers. Lest anyone suggest a notion of the "democracy of the marketplace," Herman and Chomsky have a ready reply: "The idea that the drive for large audiences makes the mass media 'democratic' thus suffers from the initial weakness that its political analog is a voting system weighted by income!"¹⁹

Television and Representations of African Americans

If children trust and believe television, believe it more the younger they are, learn about blacks from it if they are white, and believe it and watch it more if they are black, particularly if they are poor, what is it that children see? Before the 1960s, viewers rarely saw any African Americans on television and when they did, the characters they saw on entertainment programs were servants, maids, cooks, butlers, mammies, or buffoons, not unlike the seven stereotypes (e.g., the Contented Slave, the Comic Negro) identified by Sterling Brown in 1933.²⁰ Even if such aggressively derogatory stereotypes hadn't appeared, Howard University theorist Michael Winston explains that "Simple exclusion' may be the most insidious form of distortion, because it reinforces the false, but widely believed, idea that blacks have contributed little to the United States."²¹ Sociologist Aimee Dorr agrees: "Borrowing from Clark's (1972) suggestion that appearing on television represents a legitimation of a person or group, one would have to conclude that the inclusion of minorities from most programming . . . suggests that they are not a legitimate part of our society."²² This seems like plain common sense, but it helps to have researchers confirm our intuitions.

Despite post-war easing of barriers to black performers, the autonomy of regional broadcasting markets cowed TV producers. "TV executives and advertisers feared alienating the white consumer in the South. They avoided programs that might be too flattering or egalitarian toward blacks."²³ The only all-black TV show of that period — *Amos 'n' Andy*, first presented in television form (after a long radio life) in 1951 — proved the rule. Yet the outrage it caused among blacks and others was not powerful enough to thwart broadcasting power brokers, who maintained the show in syndication until litigation against it finally succeeded thirteen years after its initial two-season run.²⁴

The era of the civil rights movement encouraged an increase in the number of black actors playing major television roles, an expansion that then evaporated in the early 1980s when only about 8% of TV characters were black.²⁵ Through the 1970s black characters on TV were usually poor and appeared almost universally in comedies. African Americans were seldom given the opportunity to act in serious, dramatic roles, a fact that has persisted through the 1980s. "[I]n forty years only thirteen weekly dramatic programs that featured African Americans, carried a black focus to viewers, and had significant impact or received critical acclaim were shown on television. Over the years, six of them were on for just a year."²⁶

Norman Lear's 1970s program *All in the Family* introduced relatively radical social issues, including groundbreaking black characters Lionel Jefferson and his family who appeared on equal social and economic footing with the Bunkers (albeit in far smaller roles). But its spin-off *The Jeffersons* was a sorry retreat to the unflattering parodic representations of the likes of *Sanford and Son*. Eugenia Collier, writing in 1974 in *Freedomway*, decried the phenomenon of "innocuous" images of blacks made for white audiences which are "comforting and entertaining to white viewers and therefore profitable to big money interests."²⁷ These programs also suggested to white audiences that they were off the hook as far as "redressing any more grievances which African Americans might have said were due."²⁸ It was an "age of the New Minstrelsy," when "blacks could anticipate benign neglect . . . At its worst, television might abandon its residual concern for social issues and revive older, more derisive formats and stereotypes."²⁹

However 1984 was the year when a new black stereotype was created for television by Bill Cosby. *The Cosby Show* became, in its 198 episodes occurring over eight years, the most frequently viewed program of that time period and the number one show on TV from 1985 to 1989. Putting his own doctorate in education to use and enlisting the aid of Harvard psychiatrist Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Cosby created a program so thoroughly about family issues that "a rival network's research department reported that millions of viewers watched 'The Cosby Show' to get advice about how to be good parents."³⁰ The most influential aspect of the program, however, was its seeming color-blindness. Henry Louis Gates observed "If you

watched television before 'Cosby,' you'd think that we talk about being black and poor all day long. What he did was simply present people as black; he didn't have to claim it for them."³¹ This characteristic naturally appealed to advertisers looking for universal audience vehicles, and its unqualified commercial success convinced a growing line of sponsors and producers to follow Cosby's lead.

Other television shows which have passed through that door included Bill Cosby's own spin-off *A Different World*; the short-lived but highly acclaimed *Frank's Place* from CBS; *Family Matters*, a Townsend production of Warner Television made for ABC, which was begun in 1989 and is still extremely popular; *Roc*, which aired on Fox television for three years until 1994 and featured actors drawn from the Broadway productions of August Wilson; *The Fresh Prince of Belair*, which is the work of Quincy Jones in partnership with Time Warner; and a number of more recent programs. The fact that these programs are fully the creations of African Americans answers Eugenia Collier's call for work that is authentically black, not "black" shows created for whites. They are a form of resistance in terms of their authorial genuineness. But they are also shaped by the rigid, profit-governed filters of the television industry, and to the degree that they have conformed to those commercial parameters they have laid themselves open to criticism.

Collier's cry twenty years ago that she was "convinced that television is one of the most potent weapons this nation has for keeping Blacks lulled, deceived, impotent"³² has not entirely faded. Henry Louis Gates's praise for Bill Cosby was qualified by his conviction that "[t]here is very little connection between the social status of black Americans and the fabricated images of black people that Americans consume each day. Moreover, the representations of blacks on TV is a very poor index to our social advancement or political progress."³³ Gates's concern is that the pervasiveness of affluence in Cosby-inspired programs, the unquestioning acceptance of middle-class lifestyles and values, implies that the responsibility for black American social conditions lies entirely with them, and in no way with society.³⁴ Herman Gray, in a 1986 essay entitled "Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-Time Situation Comedy," issued a similar warning: "With their emphasis on individualism and individual achievement in a supposedly colourblind

society, the present generation of black male images offers popular legitimation for a narrow and conservative definition of race relations and racial interaction. The major impact of this narrow conception is to deflect attention from the persistence of racism, inequality and differential power.¹³⁵

Caribbean workers' expressed similar complaints. Their reactions to *The Cosby Show* were collected in a recent study by Monica Payne appearing in the *Journal of Black Studies*, and while generally very positive, included such comments as "the show hardly looks at the other side of Black Americans' lifestyles; it highlights the Black bourgeoisie," and "this show highlights a typical middle-class family of professionals who show no concern for less fortunate Blacks. They have divorced themselves from the rest."¹³⁶ Paula Matabane wrote from a related vantage point in a 1988 essay appearing in the *Journal of Communication*. Given the fact that *The Cosby Show*

epitomizes the Afro-American dream of full acceptance and assimilation into U.S. society . . . we should consider the role television plays in the cultivation of an overall picture of growing racial equality that conceals unequal social relationships and overestimates of how well blacks are integrating into white society (if at all). The illusion of well-being among the oppressed may lead to reduced political activity and less demand for social justice and equality.³⁷

An emphasis on affluence, assimilation, and individual responsibility in programs featuring African Americans is troubling for another reason. Television images don't just include entertainment, they are made up in large part by advertisements and news. And the images of black people shown on TV news have usually been very different from those offered in entertainment programs. Michael Winston notes that during the 1960s when television news images were filled with black children entering white schools or non-violent demonstrators facing unlawful assault, this disparity manifested itself as "two black realities" – the synthetic reality of the sitcoms and the one broadcast by the news programs – which for a decade, though juxtaposed strangely, could never be reconciled.¹³⁸

More recently, though, the divergent representations share the implication that once again the individual – without regard for social forces – is held responsible for her circumstances. In an essay entitled "Television, Black Americans, and the American Dream," Herman Gray compares the "open class structure, racial tolerance, economic mobility, the sanctity of individualism, and the availability of the American Dream for black Americans" found in *The Cosby Show* and the success stories of Cosby's followers, with the content of newscasts and documentaries which focus mainly on poverty and violence. "In media reports of urban crime, prisons overcrowded with black men, increased violence associated with drugs, and the growing ranks of the homeless are drawn the lines of success and failure."⁹⁹ In these settings, exemplified by Bill Moyers in his 1985 CBS documentary special *The Vanishing Family: Crisis In Black America*, Gray concludes that blame for social failures is placed on the individuals, the victims. The fact that these two contrasting representations of African Americans – one affluent and successful, one poor and failing – seldom if ever appear in the same context "appeals to the utopian desire in blacks and whites for racial oneness and equality while displacing the persistent reality of racism and racial inequality or the kinds of social struggles and cooperation required to eliminate them."¹⁰⁰

It would appear that the "double consciousness" of African American experience has persisted, although it has evolved. The identity of the colonized "other" is still constructed by news reports of drive-by shootings, welfare fraud, single mothers, and drug trade. Those who are given that identity are unable to "confront the fragmented and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed within the dominant regimes of . . . visual representation of the West."¹⁰¹ The split consciousness which is produced in those representations is set apart from images of an assimilated "other," subject of popular sit-coms and entertainment programs, whose identity – even if it is their *own* creation – flows into the mainstream. There has been accommodation; but has there really been resistance?

Contemporary Television

The television industry was shaken up in 1986 when Australian Rupert Murdoch, after buying Twentieth Century Fox and

Metromedia TV (and becoming a U.S. citizen to comply with FCC rules on network ownership), created the Fox network, the first major competitor to NBC, CBS and ABC since television began. Because the three major television corporations had traditionally geared their programming to older, and hence more mainstream, audiences, Fox's strategy included a recognition that younger markets were not being "served" (exploited). Murdoch clearly had his eye on metropolitan demographics: "The Fox network . . . has won some loyalty from young, urban viewers, who lap up quirky or crude shows like 'The Simpsons' and 'Martin.'"¹²

That the mainstream press chose to characterize Fox simply as "quirky or crude" betrayed its bias. Other Fox shows have included *Roc*, mentioned above, and *In Living Color*, starring the Wayans Brothers. The former, with its cast drawn from the repertory group of August Wilson, pushed the envelope of African American representation strongly in a serious, dramatic direction within the framework of situation comedy. *Roc* broke with the "success or failure" stereotypes that Herman Gray disparaged by questioning racist social structures within the context of its narrative more deeply than other comedies had. *In Living Color*, conversely, used biting satire to accomplish some of the same ends. By serving up blatantly exaggerated versions of the old, already overdrawn black stereotypes, Keenan Ivory Wayans aimed to "undermine the perceptions of the dominant order [through the] age-old device employed by persecuted groups to subvert the status quo."¹³ And while Wayans has come under fire — as did Norman Lear with *All In The Family*, for inadvertently reinforcing bigotry — other critics feel that the context of satire makes all the difference.

Although the cast is racially mixed, the viewer is reminded at the opening of each show . . . that this is to be a half-hour of jokes about African-Americans that has been written and produced by African Americans. This fact makes a difference in the way the humor is to be interpreted . . . Jokes about blacks where the teller and audience are black constitute a form of self-awareness.¹⁴

There's no question that programs like those on Fox need to appeal relatively widely to a mix of viewers, so producers back off serious themes quickly if they touch them at all. Commercial pressures on major networks do not yet obviate that compromise. Cable television, with its specialized delivery system and diverse market appeal, has enabled producers like Black Entertainment Television (BET), among others, to thrive. But within the broadcast networks, opportunities for commerce have also encouraged multi-ethnic programs. The successes of Bill Cosby's work in television, and more particularly Spike Lee's in film, have shown how racial bias blinded others to the existence of population groups – white and black – whose attitudes towards race have changed since the 1950s, and thus blinded them to untapped markets. By making new use of their double consciousness, African American producers now speak to ``the tastes of urbane black audiences who have learned to live with ambiguity, as well as . . . white audiences for whom, too, racial matters have grown less starkly black-and-white."⁴⁵

In the more specialized arenas of cable television, black stand-up comedy – which *In Living Color* relates to – provides the strongest voice of resistance being broadcast. Norma Schulman characterizes it as ``minor discourse" arising in opposition to the white, mainstream ``majority discourse" it grows from. Its function is ``to allow minority groups to become insiders in an exchange of in-group, subcultural allusions; and, conversely, to exclude outsiders – in this case, non-minority television audiences unversed in the particular idiom of African American humor and black culture."⁴⁶ While these are unquestionably examples of resistance that have a strong bearing on how American black identity is constructed through representation, the fact that these programs are more frequently found on cable television or at late night hours suggests that they will have less of an impact than broadcast television has on children, at least on younger children.

Network television, clearly the strongest force affecting kids, continues to evolve in a rapid and unpredictable way, particularly in light of the recent growth and assertiveness of conservative political impulses. Between the end of 1993 and June 1994, Fox executives made a bold move to stiffen competition with its three big rivals by capturing NFL football coverage away from CBS (who had been its carrier for 40 years), and then adding 50 new affiliate stations in a new

partnership with New World Communications Group. Fox now has 188 affiliate stations, compared with CBS's 215, NBC's 214, and ABC's 225.⁴⁷ In an industry beholden to audience size, this means Fox is a contender.

But competition with NBC, ABC, and CBS, has meant programming changes at Fox, which decided to "age-up" its product and go more mainstream. It canceled *Roc* and *In Living Color* in the fall of 1994. These decisions were major factors in a mutiny of its former head, Jamie Kellner, and others, who in January of 1995 began the new Warner Brothers Network. "Jamie felt that abandoning the original, edgy, youth-oriented programming was a mistake by Fox"⁴⁸ is how a WB department head explained it recently. WB, a part-time network like Fox, began its very first season with four shows: *The Wayans Brothers*, *The Parent Hood* (a Townsend production), *Muscle*, and *Unhappily Ever After* (a *Married With Children* sequel); of these, *Wayans* is a sitcom with many of the same appeals of *In Living Color* (including its two stars), while *Parent Hood* is a Cosby-like family program. This fall, WB plans to add several new programs, and again half of them will feature non-white casts with a strong emphasis on women. These include older episodes of *Sister-Sister* (originally aired on ABC), which is an updated black version of the movie *The Parent Trap*; *Cleghorne*, about a black single mom played by a star of *Saturday Night Live*; and the first program to feature a Latina as its star, entitled *Jackie Guerra*.

Time Warner is the parent company of the WB network. Warner Brothers Television is a separate division of Time Warner, and a program supplier for a variety of networks. Its productions include a number of programs by and about African Americans such as *Family Matters*, made for ABC, and *The Fresh Prince of Belair*, produced for NBC by Quincy Jones in partnership with Time Warner. Time Warner is headed by an African American, Richard Parsons, who became its president in February of 1995. WB's head of development and comedy programming said that he and one other man were the only white staff members of his department; he is 27 years old, the head of prime-time — a woman — is 33, and another area head is 37. "We've all grown up in a society where we're more color blind than our predecessors. We work in a multicultural environment, we grew up that way, so we don't see a difference."⁴⁹ This may well be an

indication that the all-white-male power structures which were so formative of television production and broadcasting are no longer omnipotent.

To what extent is the claim of color-blindness disingenuous, though? `` `Follow the money,' that's the rule. If there was no advertiser desire to reach those viewers, then there would be no impetus to reach them."⁵⁰ That is the perspective of the director of programming at WPIX (Channel 11) in New York City, flagship station of the WB network, which is owned by Tribune Broadcasting and is the only unaffiliated station in the New York metropolitan area. WB chose WPIX to introduce itself because, as its director of development explained, ``if you do well in New York, L.A., and Chicago, you've got a pretty solid hold" on overall ratings. WPIX aims for an audience demographic under 50 years old, which contrasts with the major networks' 35-64 target group.

How does this translate into viewers? Every week night during the Spring, 1995 season, from 7 to 8 P.M. WPIX broadcasts *The Fresh Prince of Belair*, followed by *Family Matters*. On Mondays at 8 P.M. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* comes on, which features Avery Brooks within a predominantly white cast. On Wednesdays, *The Wayans Brothers* begins at 8, and after it *The Parent Hood*. (Tuesday and Thursday there are movies at 8 and on Friday it's baseball.) In the New York metropolitan market, *Fresh Prince* on WPIX at 7 has the most kids watching it, more than all other shows at that hour combined. During that time, 34% of all children aged 2-11 are watching TV. Of those children, 40% (14% of all kids in New York) are watching *The Fresh Prince of Belair*. These numbers hold for *Family Matters*. Mondays at 8 virtually no children watch *Deep Space 9* because they've switched to NBC to watch original episodes of *Fresh Prince*. But on Wednesdays, most kids watch *The Wayans* and *Parent Hood*.⁵¹ One conclusion to draw from this television station's ratings is that in New York, at least, a great many children (and many adults, too) are seeing a variety of programs by and about African Americans. Outside New York, or Chicago, or L.A., the picture is undoubtedly different, although *Fresh Prince* continues to be a popular hit for NBC nationwide.

Is this opposition to the mainstream? Does this affect childrens' developing sense of cultural identity? The answer must be both yes

and no. Clearly television experiences today are vastly different than those of children growing up in the 1950s and the 1960s. There is no question that a variety of positive characterizations of African Americans are shown in a number of different program settings. There is far less of a sense that TV presents only a limited number of representative, stereotypical images of black people. But many of the same criticisms of middle-class acquiescence that were leveled at *Cosby* can be applied to the most popular contemporary black programs. *Fresh Prince*, for instance, is predicated on the life of a teenager from inner-city L.A. whose life is transposed, in Cinderella fashion, into his wealthy, lawyer uncle's family. Quincy Jones, ``whose personal narrative of racial uplift has recently become something of a cipher for black creativity in general and black musical genius in particular,⁵² is surely drawing on his own very challenging childhood experiences to try to send a message — made palatable through the coating of comedy — to broad, mixed general audiences. Serious themes about racial, economic, and social issues are regularly introduced into the scripts, and the program itself, like Jones's lifelong career in music, ``demonstrates the aesthetic and commercial fruits of pain and suffering.⁵³ But in the medium of the sitcom these themes always have an unreal quality that gets undercut by the comedic setting they're stitched into.

Family Matters is obviously meant to be gentle, warm, appealing family fare, and while its setting is more working-class than *Fresh Prince*, the fact that the father is a policeman reverts to older stereotypes. Whose law is he upholding? It is also very hard to read the Janeel White character, Steve Erkel. In some ways Erkel seems like the most horrifying minstrel character, and in other ways he seems like a parody of a white, brainy nerd, the kind of high school science or math geek who was often a regular feature of white teenagers' programs. The latter interpretation suggests a reaction against the *Webster* phenomenon. *Webster* was a program in the 1970s about a diminutive black character who was adopted by benevolent, liberal whites in a gesture that seemed to signify racial understanding but whose latent message many felt was the disempowerment of black men and the inability of black parents to care for their own children.⁵⁴ Erkel on *Family Matters* is estranged from his unsympathetic doctor father. Erkel's goofy, hyper-articulate intellectualism is abundantly irritating to

the other characters on the show, but they tolerate him nonetheless. He could symbolize a benevolent disempowerment of white men by black characters.

The problem, finally, may lie with the program format itself. Henry Louis Gates hopes that with the realization that the very structure of the sitcom (in which every character is a type) militates against its use as an agent of social change, blacks will stop looking to TV for our social liberation. As a popular song in the early '70s put it, 'The revolution will not be televised.'⁵⁵ Not, that is, unless a sponsor can be found.

And what about TV commercials? Eat. Sleep. Play. What else is there? This is the message of Nintendo, a frequent sponsor on WPIX. Who are friends? They're the *Gameboy* video game, *Kirby and Friends!* If you want to get into the NBA, practice. And drink Sprite, like basketball star Grant Hill. Parents think the Oreo Granola Bar is good food, but kids know it's Oreo! Have *Sensations* from Heath Bar! For unbelievable excitement and fun, go to *6 Flags* Theme Park! Have a happy meal at MacDonalds! And on and on. Advertisements on television reflect the quintessential utopian ideal. African American and white people of all ages appear together in a major proportion of television commercials, in settings that are so perfectly happy, fun, clean, exciting, and affluent that they hardly ever have the tensions of narrative conflict to resolve, much less real, social problems. Paula Matabane was worried that those who watched middle-class ease and equality on *The Cosby Show* and its legacy would suffer from the "illusion of well-being among the oppressed," causing them to become politically apathetic. The greatest threat, though, seems to come from the commercial messages. Some statistics indicate that after the age of 2, children see an average of three full hours of TV advertisements every week. For several years, often many years, they believe and trust what they see.⁵⁶ As much as any element of television, advertising shapes identity and does so in ways that urgently need to be acknowledged.

The ineluctable commercialism of television makes resistance to it possible only in the most problematic way. The many failed efforts at broadcasting legislation on behalf of children suggest that the television industry is most effectively reached and changed through its markets. Everyone in its audience – and especially parents for their children –

must develop a new consciousness of themselves as the product being sold to sponsors. This concept is a loaded one for the descendants of slaves, but where the television industry is not serving children, especially black Americans and their children, the advice of the Rev. Jesse Jackson is good: "We have consumer power, we have viewer power, we have the power to change dials. We will do just that until there is a change."⁵⁷ Change dials, or even turn it off.

Notes

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⁹Timothy Meyer, *et al.*, "How Black Children See TV Commercials," *The Journal of Advertising Research*, 18, No. 5 (1978), 53.

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¹²Aimee Dorr, "Television and the Socialization of the Minority Child," in *Television and the Socialization of the Minority Child*, ed. Gordon Berry and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (New York: Academic Press, 1982), p. 22.

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¹⁴Comstock and Cobbey, p. 106.

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¹⁸Mallory Wober and Barrie Gunter, *Television and Social Control* (Cambridge: Gower Publishing Co., 1988), p. 162.

¹⁹Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988) p. 16.

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²³J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983), p. 8.

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⁴⁵Thomas Cripps, "Film," in *Split Image*, p. 166.

⁴⁶Norma Schulman, "The House that Black Built: Television Stand-up Comedy as Minor Discourse," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (1994), 109.

⁴⁷*Newsweek*, June 6, 1994, pp. 47-48.

⁴⁸Phone interview with Jordan Levin, head of development and comedy programming at Warner Brothers Network (where "there are no official titles"), Burbank, California, June 16, 1995.

⁴⁹Phone interview with Jordan Levin.

⁵⁰Phone interview with Jerry Graf, Director of Programming, WPIX Television, New York, New York, June 12, 1995.

⁵¹Phone interview with Jerry Graf, quoting Nielsen Ratings Book, May, 1995.

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⁵³Gilroy, p. 107.

⁵⁴Dates, p. 274.

⁵⁵Gates, p. 40.

⁵⁶Doubleday and Droege, p. 30.

⁵⁷*Ebony*, October, 1994, p. 27.