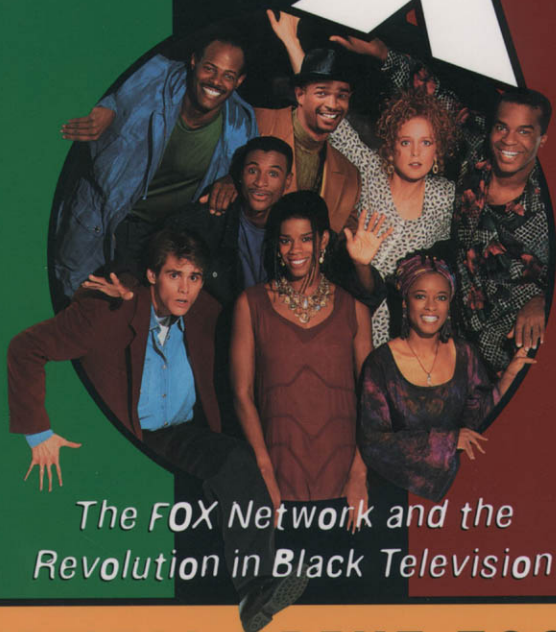


FOX BY COLOR



*The FOX Network and the
Revolution in Black Television*

KRISTAL BRENT ZOOK

Color by Fox

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
 <i>Part 1: Color and Caste</i>	
1: Blood Is Thicker than Mud: C-Note Goes to Compton on <i>The Fresh Prince of Bel Air</i>	15
2: High Yella Bananas and Hair Weaves: <i>The Sinbad Show</i>	25
3: Ralph Farquhar's <i>South Central</i> and <i>Pearl's Place to Play</i> : Why They Failed Before <i>Moesha</i> Hit	36
 <i>Part 2: Gender and Sexuality</i>	
4: Sheneneh, Gender-Fuck, and Romance: <i>Martin's</i> Thin Line Between Love and Hate	53
5: <i>Living Single</i> and the "Fight for Mr. Right": Latifah Don't Play	65
 <i>Part 3: Social Movement</i>	
6: Under the Sign of Malcolm: Memory, Feminism, and Political Activism on <i>Roc</i>	77
7: Boricua Power in the Boogie-Down Bronx: Puerto Rican Nationalism on <i>New York Undercover</i>	88
 <i>Conclusion</i>	 100
<i>Notes</i>	108
<i>References</i>	118
<i>Index</i>	143

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Los Angeles
January 1998

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Color by Fox

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Introduction

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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

suffered enough to be a “legitimate” family member.

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

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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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