

Ann duCille

technicolored

reflections on race
in the time of tv

TECHNICOLORED

A Camera Obscura book



Technicolored

REFLECTIONS ON RACE IN THE TIME OF TV

Ann duCille

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IN MEMORY OF OUR BELOVED COUSIN

Michelangelo “Michel” Everard duCille

Pulitzer Prize-winning

photojournalist and humanitarian

1956–2014

On assignment . . .

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CONTENTS

| | |
|-----|---|
| ix | ACKNOWLEDGMENTS |
| 1 | INTRODUCTION Black and White and Technicolored: Channeling the TV Life |
| 22 | CHAPTER 1 What's in a Game? Quiz Shows and the "Prism of Race" |
| 52 | CHAPTER 2 "Those Thrilling Days of Yesteryear": Stigmatic Blackness and the Rise of Technicolored TV |
| 83 | CHAPTER 3 The Shirley Temple of My Familiar: Take Two |
| 112 | CHAPTER 4 Interracial <i>Loving</i> : Sexlessness in the Suburbs of the 1960s |
| 134 | CHAPTER 5 "A Credit to My Race": Acting Black and Black Acting from <i>Julia</i> to <i>Scandal</i> |
| 159 | CHAPTER 6 A Clear and Present Absence: <i>Perry Mason</i> and the Case of the Missing "Minorities" |

| | |
|-----|---|
| 183 | CHAPTER 7 |
| | “Soaploitation”: Getting Away with Murder in Prime Time |
| 209 | CHAPTER 8 |
| | The Punch and <i>Judge Judy</i> Shows: Really Real TV and the Dangers of a Day in Court |
| 232 | CHAPTER 9 |
| | The Autumn of His Discontent: Bill Cosby, Fatherhood, and the Politics of Palatability |
| 261 | CHAPTER 10 |
| | The “Thug Default”: Why Racial Representation Still Matters |
| 285 | EPILOGUE |
| | Final Spin: “That’s Not My Food” |
| 289 | NOTES |
| 311 | BIBLIOGRAPHY |
| 325 | INDEX |

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As the following pages reveal, TV viewing began for me in the early 1950s as a shared activity. In some ways, it remains so, even though I am often physically alone when I sit down in front of the television set these days. I have the great gift of counting among my current televisual companions and critical interlocutors a virtual army of family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and associates, from Nancy and Rhonda, the hairstylists at Sebastian's, to the strangers I have met on trains and planes, in doctors' waiting rooms, and even in the produce aisle at the grocery store. (I won't out the physician who kept other patients waiting while he and I dished about Shonda Rhimes and *Scandal*.) To recognize all my confederates—to thank each deserving partner in crime for the many conversations and critiques, dialogues and debates that have helped call these reflections into being—would mean a list of acknowledgments nearly as long as the book. I offer, therefore, my general but no less sincere gratitude to the many with whom I have talked TV.

Since the early days of watching soaps in the Graduate Center dorms with Gayl Jones and Audrey DuPuy, laughing ourselves silly when Walter Curtain (who had let his pregnant wife stand trial for a murder he committed) drove his car off a cliff in the middle of downtown Bay City, I have enjoyed the good company and intellectual camaraderie of colleagues, friends, and students at institutions ranging from Brown to Wesleyan to the University of California at San Diego and back again. Here, too, it is impossible to name names in a way that would do justice to the many, so I will settle for singling out a few who have been particular champions of this project, including Laura Wexler, who was the first to say I should write about TV, and Indira Karamcheti, who long ago encouraged me to write a memoir.

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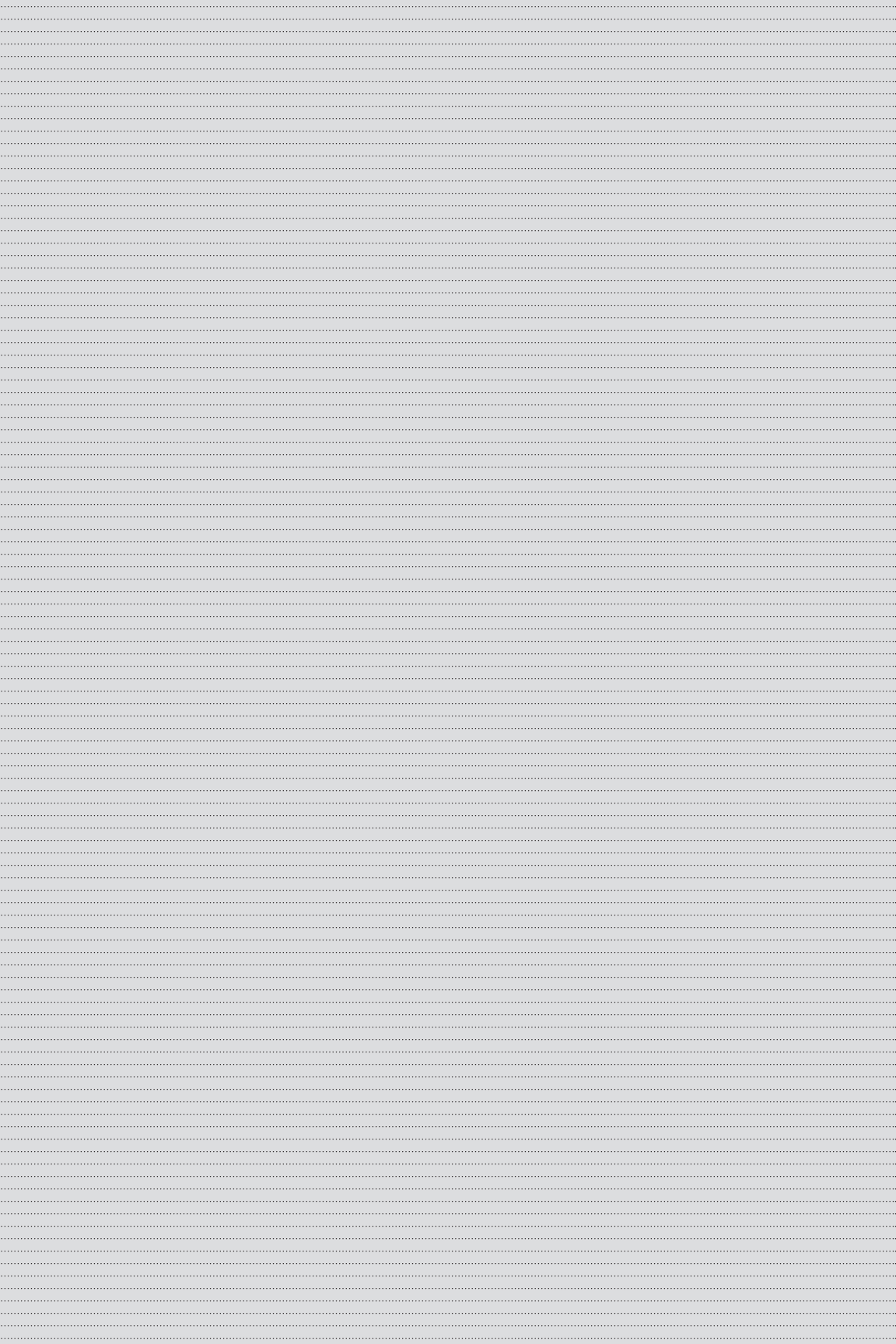
My good friend Rebecca Flewelling in Vermont threw me under the bus and gave me up to her son as the reason she was watching so much lame TV. I thank her just the same for all the good times, long talks, and *Say Yes to the Dress* critiques. The same is true for other old friends who have stayed tuned in with me for everything from the imagined communities of *Star Trek*'s several generations to the breaking news of MSNBC and the broken hearts of *Married at First Sight*: Janice Allen, Josephine Bernard, Alfrieta Parks Monagan, Krystal and Az Ndukwu, and John Simmons, with special thanks to the Honorable Julie Bernard for her advice and counsel and to Nathan and Erness Brody for their enduring faith in my work.

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My final thanks go to my family who live in these pages with me, especially my younger brother, Danny, my oldest friend and favorite person, and his partner, Linda Pumphrey; my nephew Adrian III, who with his siblings has made "Auntie Ann" my favorite title; and my cousins Oliver duCille and Cecil and Beth Thompson, who remind me of my Jamaican roots, and Neal and Clarence "Sonny" Hogan, who remind me of my childhood and crazy good times with kin.



Black and White and Technicolored

CHANNELING THE TV LIFE

Certainly it comes as news to no one that television has been a mainstay of modern home life since its arrival in the living rooms of American families in the 1950s. The media theorist Lynn Spigel, one of the foremost authorities on mass culture at midcentury, points out that while only 9 percent of American homes had a television set in 1950, postwar consumers purchased the new technology at such record rates that by the end of the decade the number of households with at least one receiver had risen tenfold to nearly 90 percent.¹ Writing with considerable prescience about the new medium in 1956, the sociologist and cultural critic Leo Bogart predicted not only that every household was destined to have a TV but also that as the technology improved and the sets themselves became lighter and less cumbersome, televisions would be spread out through individual homes, with a set installed in nearly every room.²

Like most Americans of the baby boom generation, I had lived comfortably with the technological marvel of television ever in the background of my everyday life. It wasn't until I retired in 2011 after more than forty years teaching in and around the university and sixty years with television as a more or less constant home companion that I began to assess the impact of the instrument and the industry on my life growing up as a black viewer in the white suburbs of Boston during the second half of the twentieth century. As a newly unminted English professor, I had expected to do with my newfound

leisure what other retired academics have done before me—attend to and indulge in all those pleasures for which there had never been time or space. I would travel to far-off, out-of-the-way places. I would return to the piano and recoup the benefit of years of lessons my parents couldn't afford but somehow paid for nonetheless. I would knit scarves and sweaters and afghans, though I wasn't certain how well I would fare without my late mother the master knitter on hand to fix my mistakes. And more than anything, I would read madly, but nothing in my own field for at least a year—nothing in African American literature or history or culture. But definitely the hot, hip, happening books everyone was talking about—the books that were winning prizes.

My first few attempts at reading on the cutting edge of bestseller glory fell flat. All that glistens is not necessarily my kind of good reading. Soon an assortment of false starts and deflated finishes topped a pile of best-laid plans that went, if not completely awry, not as I had imagined or hoped. Thus it was that through a long and winding road of half-read books, arthritic fingers that insulted the piano, and travel plans that somehow never went beyond the brochures, I wound up spending out the first year of retirement in front of the ubiquitous TV sets (which as predicted presented themselves in nearly every room), endlessly watching fifty-year-old reruns of *Perry Mason*, *Bachelor Father*, *Make Room for Daddy*, and numerous other series and sitcoms from my misspent youth, while also catching up on some of the hot twenty-first-century shows pitched as products of the new postracialism.

As much as a tidal wave of intellectual exhaustion enticed me to think of the *Bachelor Father* daily double or a *Perry Mason* weekend marathon as a mindless escape into the fictions of the 1950s, I know the work of Susan Smulyan and other media theorists too well to take any TV programming for granted or any act of TV viewing as innocent. The opening sentence of Smulyan's essential study *Popular Ideologies: Mass Culture at Mid-century* (2007) was all too apropos and instructive, even as I wanted to wallow in useless abandon: "Complex ideas of race, class, gender, nationhood, and consumption were created, expressed, and worked out in popular culture forms in the middle of the twentieth century."³ Nowhere were these complex ideas more dramatically on display than in the very shows of yesteryear that I was revisiting daily. All the old familiar stereotypes are as they always were in these classic shows of my youth, but the longer I tracked TV programming across the half century, the harder I was hit by that old adage, "the more things change, the more they stay the same." The old racism I knew so well had been replaced, it seemed to me, by a new racism perhaps even more insidious for its many masquerades as "civility," "reality," "authenticity," and,

almost everywhere I turned the metaphorical dial, as eruptions of cultural funk and outcroppings of a buffoonish black performativity, on the one hand, or a depraved indifference to ethics, on the other—what I define in chapter 2 as “stigmatic blackness”—celebrated as the new normal and the new human.

Making a similar point about old racism versus new, Paula Groves Price, a cultural theorist from Washington State University, argues that 1950s televisual images of African Americans as “mammies, Sambos, hoodlums, and Jezebels,” among other similarly demeaning representations, “have been instrumental in (re)inscribing ideologies of inequality and white supremacy.” But “while many of the same images can readily be seen on television today,” she adds, “they often appear under the guise of reality television, black popular culture, or postracial ensemble shows.” Television and other forms of mass media appropriate aspects of the black community’s responses to a long history of racism, discrimination, and oppression and repackage these cultural modalities as a decontextualized black experience, devoid of any attention to what Price rightly points to as “the sociopolitical conditions that instigate [such] responses.”⁴ As I address in chapter 10, drawing on the work of the cultural theorist Tricia Rose, gangsta rap, for example, which was born in the inner city as the response of urban youth to the harsh, often hopeless conditions of ghetto life, not only becomes decontextualized by mass culture and commercialized as a celebration of thugs, pimps, and hoes but also becomes what black culture is in the popular imagination. In other words, the history and being of the whole are reduced to the behavior of the few—often presented as the most outrageous or the most countercultural—made to stand in for all black experience. Thus it is that television, as a form of mass communication, Price concludes, works to “reinscribe racist ideologies of blackness by framing it as black culture to the world.”⁵ Any black is every black, as I describe this regnant racial metonymy in chapter 1, drawing on my mother’s wisdom.

But it isn’t only what the old folks call “book learning”—the critiques of media theorists like Price and Smulyan—that makes me question how mass media have used “entertainment and consumption to construct and reinforce hierarchies of gender, class, and race.”⁶ I am a colored child of the 1950s, reared on resisting the racist images that television habitually inscribes as the ways of black folk. Long before I picked up a book on the subject, home training made me a suspicious, even resistant viewer, who early on learned to perceive every detail of television programming through the lens of race. I’m not sure whether to thank or blame my mother for this tinted, if not tainted, view of mass culture, but I do largely credit her as the source of my suspicion.

She was born in 1921, long before the advent of television as a form of home entertainment, but, next to books, cinema was the favorite cheap amusement of her youth. Perhaps because, as a young moviegoer in the 1930s and '40s, she was both shaped and shaken by the demeaning portrayals of blacks she witnessed in Shirley Temple films and elsewhere on-screen, my mother recognized early on the tremendous representational power of the new medium that brought moving images into the homes of everyday Americans. Even when it was very, very white, television was still somehow all about black, with the ability to make or break us as a race. It was in watching TV through my mother's resistant eyes that I first became captivated by and suspicious of a ubiquitous black presence that haunts American television and film, even in seeming absentia, in much the same way that American literature is shadowed by what the Nobel laureate Toni Morrison identifies in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) as a "dark and abiding presence"—a "mediating force" at once both visible and invisible. "Even, and especially, when American texts are not 'about' Africanist presences or characters or narratives or idioms," Morrison writes, "the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation."⁷

Technicolored: Reflections on Race in the Time of TV was born of a year of living dangerously in front of the television set, but it also looks back over more than half a century of TV viewing through the prism of race. Neither a conventional memoir nor a traditional media study, *Technicolored* uses my own family history and postwar experiences—from the polio epidemic that drove us from the city and ultimately brought us our first TV set, to the propriety concerns that governed what and how we watched—as the framework for a personal narrative of growing up black with the new medium of television, which shaped my childhood. It examines the changing face of racial representation from the early 1950s, when people of color were at once nowhere and everywhere on TV, to the present, when we are everywhere but, perhaps, still nowhere, with many of the same stereotypes of blacks as villains, vixens, victims, and first-to-die disposable minorities still in play, even as new, equally limited and limiting images of blacks and blackness crowd the airwaves. Reflecting on and critiquing the role of race in televisual genres from black sitcoms like *The Beulah Show*, *Amos 'n' Andy*, *Julia*, and *The Cosby Show*; to the Shirley Temple films and Charlie Chan movies I watched on TV as a child; to a spate of TV game shows now hosted by black comedians and

prime-time dramas headlined by black actors in shows such as *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Technicolored* poses critical questions about the roads television has traveled and continues to traverse in its depictions of African Americans, in particular, and what part those depictions play in fixing notions of the racially “othered” in the American imagination.

This last issue—the role that representation plays in stigmatizing black men, women, and children as dangerous and expendable—is a guiding concern of the book and one of the most critical questions of our time. In accepting the Humanitarian Award at the 2016 Black Entertainment Television (BET) award ceremony, the African American actor and activist Jesse Williams delivered a blistering Black Lives Matter manifesto in which he pointed out that data show that “police somehow managed to deescalate, disarm, and not kill white people every day.”⁸ How is it, then, that black men, women, and children—including most infamously twelve-year-old Tamir Rice fatally shot by police in a Cleveland park while playing with a replica of an air gun—are so often instantaneously killed by law enforcement officers who claim they feared for their lives? Is it because Caucasians are not quintessentially cast on TV and elsewhere in popular culture and political discourse as a dark and deadly menace to society? In perhaps its most important move, *Technicolored* examines the relationship between popular portrayals of African Americans as criminals and thugs and the deaths of scores of unarmed black men, women, and children, among whom the names of Amadou Diallo, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, and Sandra Bland are merely some of the best known in an increasingly long list. At the same time, the less well-remembered names of Eulia May Love from 1979 and Margaret LaVerne Mitchell from 1999—both shot and killed by Los Angeles police (LAPD) officers, infamously in Love’s case over a \$22 gas bill and over a shopping cart in the case of Margaret Mitchell, who was mentally ill and homeless—should remind us that such shootings are not a new phenomenon.⁹ Ultimately *Technicolored* looks to television as an accessory before and after the fact whose color-coded news coverage, stigmatizing storytelling, and clichéd typecasting make TV a potentially deadly form of racial profiling.

These reflections are propelled and made personal by the fact that TV and I have traveled along parallel tracks since our respective births at midcentury. I came into the world in Brooklyn in 1949, just as Jackie Robinson was

breaking the color line in Major League Baseball and the new medium of television was beginning to appear in American homes, although it had not yet made its way into my family's second-floor flat in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Radio still ruled the roost. The voice of Edward R. Murrow kept us informed about world events. Heard-but-not-seen characters like Beulah, Amos and Andy, Jack Benny and Rochester, and the Lone Ranger and Tonto kept us entertained. The radio was such a constant companion that I'm told I was nicknamed "Buzzy" because as a baby I made a buzzing sound to the theme music of *The FBI in Peace and War* (CBS Radio, 1944–1958) whenever the show aired. Since the "FBI March" was from Prokofiev's opera *The Love for Three Oranges*, my buzzing along to classical music from the cradle was the first of several false notes that led my mother and father to believe I was musically gifted.

Like most Brooklynites—even transplanted ones—my parents were devoted Dodgers fans; listening to baseball games on the radio was a favorite pastime, second only to watching the Dodgers play in person at Ebbets Field, as my family did regularly. I take some pride in being able to say that from my father's lap, I have watched Jackie Robinson steal home. I don't actually remember any of this, unfortunately, because we left New York for Boston when I was two years old. The fond memories I have of the Dodgers and of the Clifton Place neighborhood that was my first home are from family lore and from the trips we made back to Brooklyn throughout the 1950s to visit my mother's sister, Auntie Bert, and her family and to see close friends and former neighbors we called Aunt Lena and Uncle Troy, who lived in the twin apartment to ours on the other side of the same brownstone row house in Bed-Stuy where we had lived as a young family of four. My mother was originally from Cambridge, Massachusetts, so Boston was close to home for her, but we—that is, my parents, Pearl Louise (Hogan) and Adrian Everard duCille; my older brother, Adrian Jr., and I—didn't linger long in the City on the Hill due to the call of the wild, the white picket-fence dream (more my mother's than my father's, I think) of raising a family in the wide open spaces and fresh air of the suburbs.

Thinking about it now, I suspect there was a motive to my mother's mad rush to leave the city that was larger, more personal, and more profound than midcentury America's generic middle-class fantasy of suburban living. My older brother—her firstborn—had had polio when he was four. He was one of the luckier victims of the polio epidemics that kept the country on edge during the first half of the twentieth century, before the advent of the Salk vaccine in 1954. My brother, Little Adrian, as he was sometimes called, was spared the respiratory problems and paralysis often associated with the



FIGS. 1.1 AND 1.2

I thought we were going up over the roof to visit Aunt Lena in the adjoining brownstone and wasn't happy at being waylaid for picture taking, but then Aunt Lena appeared on her way to our flat, and I was all smiles, circa 1950.

disease. By some miracle, he made an almost complete recovery and was left with only slightly diminished muscle strength and slower reflexes on one side of his body.

I was a baby at the time and have no firsthand memory of what my brother and my parents went through, but my mother often spoke of the trauma of seeing her little boy suffer, of hearing him wail and cry out for her at the hospital when the doctors were trying to tap fluid from the base of his spine for serological testing in order to confirm the polio diagnosis. She talked of the added anguish of not being allowed to go to her child and comfort and reassure him, because well-meaning medical minds knew better than mere parents. “They whisked him away without letting us explain why he had to go with them,” my mother would say. “He would have been all right if they had just let us talk to him, but he probably thought we had abandoned him and his little heart was broken.” I would weep whenever my mother told this part of the story. It was a sad, heartrending early chapter in our family history, and even though I knew the story had a happy ending, I felt a kind of grief that lingers still.

But the story did have a happy ending (or so it seemed) and not just because my brother grew to be a straight, strapping 6’3” and to father four children, but because at some point in the midst of the misery that awful night in the summer of 1950, Little Adrian gave up on wailing for Mummy and Daddy and started yelling at the doctor: “Shut up, Doctor! Shut up! Shut up, I say, Doctor! Shut up!” The funny thing was that, as my mother would tell the tale, the doctor wasn’t saying a word and no doubt wondered why this little colored boy he was trying to help was telling him to shut up. Here, my mother would pause for effect and then take great maternal pleasure in informing whoever was listening that *she* had understood instantly why Adrian kept telling the doctor to shut up. It was his way of cussing out the doctor, of telling him off—a four-year-old’s “f-you,” as it were. He didn’t know any real swear words—nobody ever dared curse around my mother or her children—and “shut up” was the worst thing he knew to say.

For all that my mother talked about my brother’s bout with polio, for all that she praised the doctors and the nurses who treated him and the March of Dimes who she said comforted and supported the family through the crisis, what she didn’t say—but what I in later years surmised or maybe just wanted to believe, since I thought my mother was Wonder Woman—is that she may have saved my brother from permanent paralysis, deformity, perhaps even death. She decided that something was wrong with her son, based on remarkably little evidence: a sudden lethargy one morning, his not acting quite

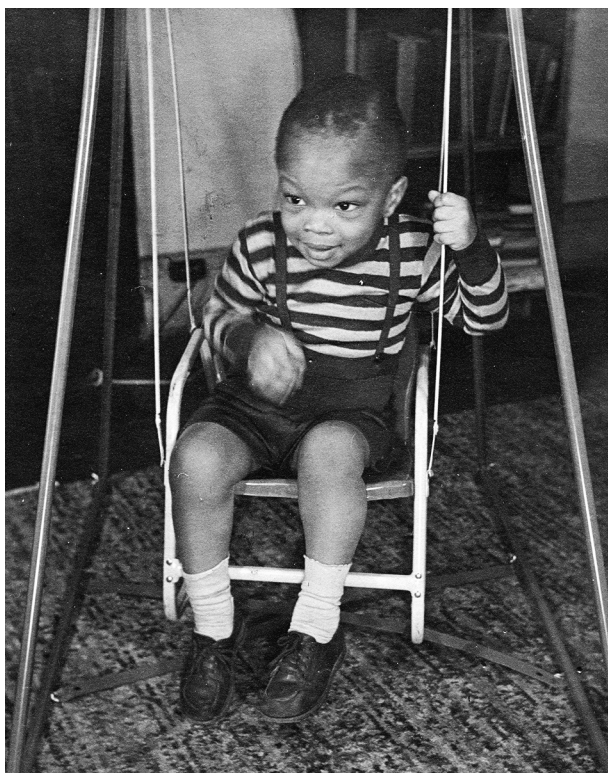


FIG. 1.3 Little Adrian in Brooklyn at two years and three months, early 1948.

like himself, especially his not wanting to play with me, the baby sister he had first wished for, then demanded, at one point telling my mother's doctor that if he would "stop squeezing those ladies' arms" (taking blood pressures), he could hurry up and get his baby sister ready. No older brother ever wanted a baby sister more than mine wanted me, or so my mother often told me. For such a little boy, he took being a big brother very seriously and thought it was his personal responsibility to make sure I was properly bathed, fed, swaddled, and cuddled. It was the first, and perhaps only, time I have been unconditionally adored. So when Little Adrian suddenly didn't have the energy to tend to his beloved baby sister's every whimper, my mother knew something was very wrong and insisted on taking him to the hospital. There was no cure for polio then or now and paralytic poliomyelitis has more than one type. My brother's, I believe, was spinal. I'm not sure of the medical facts, but I like to think that early intervention made a difference.

In any case, this must be what it was that drove the move to the country at any cost, the thing that possessed near lifelong city dwellers to light out for territories unknown: polio panic. Rightly or wrongly, polio was seen as the scourge of the long, hot summers in the city, and I suspect that, with one son already stricken, my mother believed her children would be safer as far from the madding crowd as she could get them. So sometime in the fall of 1952—shortly before my baby brother, Danny, was born—we moved to a virgin piece of free land in East Bridgewater, a small town about twenty-five miles southeast of Boston, and began the arduous and unending task of building a house in the country. We began, rather unglamorously, by living in the basement with an outhouse and then, over the course of the next forty years, built up the house around us, block by block.

I don't recall that my father ever talked about the polio event or how close he came to losing his firstborn, namesake son to the disease that paralyzed a president and crippled and killed so many children before the saving grace of Jonas Salk's elixir. I so wish now that I had asked my father about it, about his take on the near tragedy of those Brooklyn days. I think now, though, that this thing that happened on the other side of my memory must be why he—a Jamaican immigrant from the capital of Kingston, yet so much at home among family and friends in New York City and so much more the urbanite—gave in to my mother's family plan for country life.

If the specter of polio—of disease, of hospitals, of a small child necessarily surrendered to the care of strangers—is what drove our family from the city, it also is the thing that brought television into our country sanctuary. At some point in what must have been 1953, when I was four, Little Adrian and I had our tonsils taken out together, I suppose so we would be company for each other. In those days, tonsillectomies weren't the same-day outpatient procedures they are now. They required a hospital stay of two or three days, with at least two nights away from home. I think it must have been hard on our parents, because when they came to pick us up from the hospital, baby brother in tow, they regaled us with tales of how much we had been missed and told us they had a surprise for us, a welcome-home present. I thought it might be a puppy, but it wasn't. It was a new, floor-model console TV set, which I remember as a Motorola.

I loved listening to the radio, but I knew nothing about television. I had seen moving pictures on the big screen at the drive-in to which we went regularly throughout the 1950s, but now the big people of the distant screen were very small and living inside the mahogany box in our den. I loved it, but it also confused me. I thought the people were real and could see me the

same way I could see them. I felt connected to them, a part of their lives, and I would lie awake in bed at night, playing out the next chapter of their narratives in my head. It's a sense of television—a mistake almost literally about ghosts in the machine—I have never quite gotten over, which is a dangerous thing for a critic, this difficulty with fact and fiction.

So it is, then, that television and I have grown up together, from our shared infancy in black and white at midcentury, when I thought the people on-screen lived inside the magic box that TV was for me, to a high-technicolored maturity in a new millennium, when I still think the characters on-screen are somehow of and about me as a racialized, gendered subject. *Technicolored* traces our joint coming of age, from those early days in the 1950s to the present, attending in particular to issues of representation and spectatorship that are both historically specific and transgenerational, personal and profoundly racial. It tells the tale of what we watched and how we watched TV against the backdrop not only of my own changing family dynamic but also of the changing times that carried the country through the civil rights and women's movements, the Vietnam War, the Reagan years, the culture clashes of the 1990s, the first black presidency, and the current Black Lives Matter campaign for social justice.

For all its temporal breadth, however, *Technicolored* makes no attempt to be comprehensive in the pioneering footsteps of more traditional studies of race and television such as J. Fred MacDonald's *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television since 1948* (1992), Herman Gray's *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (1995), Sasha Torres's edited volume *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States* (1998), and Donald Bogle's *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (2001), or a wealth of newer work on the topic.¹⁰ Rather, the scope of the project is limited to and by my own restricted vision, controlled quite literally by my own viewing habits. There is, for example, no discussion of BET as there almost certainly would be in a more traditional examination of race and television in the latter twentieth century. I, however, have been only a casual, sometime viewer of BET, tuning in selectively for jazz or news reports. But BET was a lifeline for my students for whom it was a link to hip hop and rap music videos and the contemporary cultural scene, and the network's inspired first drama *Being Mary Jane* deserves more careful analysis than my spotty viewing allows for. Nor beyond discussions of series like *Julia*, *Good Times*, and *The Cosby Show* is

due attention paid here to the black situation comedies that have been a primary site and prescribed Hollywood home of black TV programming since the 1950s. It's a genre for which I seem always to have been either too cynical or too critical to appreciate the lowbrow lunacy.

Although presented in the first person, *Technicolored* is not a traditional memoir full of intimate details and family secrets but, rather, a series of personal reflections that correspond to and, I hope, complement an extended critique of television as I have experienced it over the course of the past sixty years. My methodology is perhaps best described as both peripatetic and highly particular, driven more by personal taste and remembrance of things past than by chronology or theme. At the same time, the book does follow the path of my own passage through six decades of what is not only my particular slice of black suburban family life but also a lens through which to glimpse a nation coming of age and confronting some of its demons of difference. Reflections on events both personal and historical provide links to and context for discussions of how television both changed with the times and in some cases helped shape the changing times. Television was out ahead of the general public on the issue of gay rights and same-sex marriage, for example, and helped bring along the president, the populace, and the Supreme Court.

In addition, individual chapters generally do adhere around a specific genre (game shows, for example), subject matter (the danger of TV "syndicourts" like *Judge Judy*), or program (*How to Get Away with Murder*, for instance), held together by overarching questions and concerns about what it means to watch television through a particular set of black eyes—to be at once colored and to watch TV as "technicolored" even when it is in black and white. I use the term "technicolored" broadly in reference to "black shows" or programs with colored characters or racial content. I use the word "colored" in its historical sense to refer to African Americans and to "people of color"—a turn of phrase or term of art with which I have never been completely satisfied.

I come to the well-established field of television studies not as a media theorist but as a literary scholar, which may suggest a certain set of disruptions. As much as I acknowledge and appreciate the conventions of the field, I admittedly tend to read televisual narratives in somewhat the same way that I read literary texts. John Fiske, one of the founding fathers of media studies, warned against treating television as literature in his early study of the medium, appropriately titled *Reading Television*. The "tools of traditional literary criticism do not quite fit the television discourse," he wrote in 1978. The "codes and structure of the 'language' of television are much more like

those of speech than writing,” he added, also noting that TV’s “‘logic’ is oral and visual.”¹¹ But television has changed dramatically from the “ephemeral, episodic” medium Fiske knew in the 1970s. Increasingly dominated by a new mode of what the media studies scholar Jason Mittell calls “narrative complexity,” television programming is coming into its own as a kind of literature.¹² In fact, some artists and cultural critics, including the celebrated writer Sir Salman Rushdie, are now calling modern small-screen dramas “the new literature.” Rushdie, who has some TV writing credits of his own, has praised in particular the kind and quality of writing behind U.S. series such as *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *The West Wing*, and *Mad Men*. What TV scriptwriters are now able to do with character and story, Rushdie suggests, is not unlike what an author can do in a novel.¹³

Others in media studies seem to agree and have weighed in on the “lure of long-form, episodic television,” whose dramatic properties invite comparisons to the big books of Charles Dickens and Henry James. Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the cultural historian and film theorist Thomas Doherty, chair of the American Studies Department at Brandeis University, has coined the term “Arc TV” for highly developed serials with long story lines of “interconnected action unfolding over the life span of the series.” He argues that while indebted to multi-episode serials from the 1970s and 1980s like *Masterpiece Theater*, *Hill Street Blues*, *L.A. Law*, and especially the deep-cover crime drama *Wiseguy*—the series credited with birthing the term “story arc”—Arc TV’s “real kinship is literary, not televisual.” Like the great tomes of British and American literature, he writes, Arc TV series are “thick on character and dense in plot line, spanning generations and tribal networks and crisscrossing the currents of personal life and professional duty.” Unlike TV series of old with enigmatic heroes such as Marshal Matt Dillon of *Gunsmoke* (1955–1975) whose personal history and inner life were not part of the long-running drama, “Arc TV is all about back story and evolution,” where again as in the novel “the aesthetic payoff comes from prolonged, deep involvement in the fictional universe.” But Doherty also acknowledges the importance of “stagecraft” in television programming, which inevitably makes TV like theater and film. “For the show to cast its magic,” he says, “the viewer must leap full body into the video stream.”¹⁴

Television lives in the visual, then, as the novel lives in language and, of course, demands an interpretive strategy attentive to that difference. I hope *Technicolored* indulges such a strategy, but I am particularly concerned in the book with an element that storied television and the novel definitely do share: narrative. I am concerned with narrative on two levels. First, I’m

interested in the various stories different programs and different kinds of programming tell their audiences. While issues of narratology are more immediately obvious in long-form serials that are character and plot driven like the ABC dramas *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, other more conventionally episodic programs—from sitcoms and police procedurals, to unscripted tabloid talkfests and even game shows—are not without their storied aspects. Even the impatient star of the eponymous small-claims arbitration series *Judge Judy*, who notoriously cuts everybody off and barely gives complainants a chance to speak, ultimately is still after two sides of a story. Her counterparts from the rival shows *Judge Mathis* and *Judge Faith* make a point of asking litigants to provide a little background. Attention to the smaller stories of such shows leads to the book's second, greater concern with the overarching narrative of race and gender in which all of these programs participate. *Technicolored* explores how this master narrative—from representations of mindless maids, mammies, butlers, and buffoons in the 1950s to depictions of cunning, endlessly calculating, and manipulative moguls and criminal masterminds of today—has both changed and stayed the same.

This book consists of ten essayistic chapters, all but one written since 2012, although a pair—chapter 8 on Judge Judy and chapter 9 on Bill Cosby—take up icons and issues with which I have been concerned for some time, and chapter 3, “The Shirley Temple of My Familiar: Take Two,” revisits, revises, and extends an earlier journal article on the cultural power of the pint-size performer and the colored cohorts who did her bidding. Chapter 1, “What’s in a Game? Quiz Shows and the ‘Prism of Race,’” introduces my family of five as we were in 1952, recently moved from the city to the suburbs of southeastern Massachusetts, and establishes the book’s guiding paradigm of reading television through what the game-show host Pat Sajak has blogged about as “the prism of race.”¹⁵ It was Sajak’s admonition against looking at the world through a racial lens that led me to consider the degree to which that is exactly how I view everything, including his own game show, *Wheel of Fortune*. To do otherwise is a great luxury African Americans can seldom afford. Begun as a simple essay about my mother’s love of game shows—especially *Wheel*—the chapter has grown into a critique of the blackening and gendering of a once predominantly white male genre that has become the purview of black comedians like the ubiquitous Steve Harvey, host of *Family Feud*, and a symbol of the hot commodity or black gold that race has become for the

television industry in the age of Oprah and Obama and what it means that this black goldmine so often has a sexed-up, dumbed-down, and dirty bur-nished edge. Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon and contemporary media theorists such as Lynne Joyrich, chapter 1 raises questions about the power of racial representation and the simultaneous and contradictory sexing and neutering of the black body—issues that resonate as concerns throughout the book.

Building on the notion of television as an instrument of uplift raised in the first chapter, the second, ““Those Thrilling Days of Yesteryear”: Stigmatic Blackness and the Rise of Technicolored TV,” examines the role of race in early variety programs like *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *American Bandstand*, where black performers provided a cheap but alluring labor that helped build the fledgling television industry even as racism both defined and limited the roles African American actors and entertainers were allowed to perform elsewhere in the medium. These limitations applied as well to other nonwhite entertainers who could be houseboys, sidekicks, savages, and desperados but little else. But while shows like *Beulah* and *Amos ’n’ Andy* were criticized for the “stigmatic blackness” they depicted and driven off the air, chapter 2 also considers the extent to which orientalism, noble savage mythology, and other stereotypes of Asians, Mexicans, Latinos, and Native Americans remain alive in regularly aired reruns, from *Bachelor Father* to *Bonanza*, as well as in contemporary programming. In addition to addressing the issue of enduring racial stereotypes, the chapter also explores the impact of the new technology on our family dynamic in the 1950s.

As previously noted, chapter 3, “The Shirley Temple of My Familiar: Take Two,” expands an essay that originally appeared in *Transition* 73 in 1998. This revised version contains a new meditation on the orientalism of Charlie Chan movies, regularly shown on TV in the 1950s and beyond, much like Shirley Temple films. Because I encountered these narratives strictly through the venue of the small screen, they played for me and for millions of other child viewers as TV programs rather than as motion pictures, and they are included here as such. In a second added move, this chapter version calls out the small-town educational system of my youth for its relative silence on the subjects of slavery, race, and racism, as well as other cataclysmic historical events such as Native genocide, Japanese internment, and the Jewish Holocaust. It also explores more deeply than the original essay the issue of racial representation from the perspective of the receiver—a black girl living in a white enclave in a body and an identity made all the more strange and undesirable by its telegraphed difference from the white, “perfect-10” cuteness of

Shirley Temple. In a sense, the chapter answers the question Zora Neale Hurston addressed almost a century ago in her essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.”¹⁶ But through readings of additional visual texts like “#FindKayla-Weber,” a disturbing episode of the TNT police procedural *Major Crimes*, the chapter raises a far more pressing question about what it means that in both fiction and fact society continues to devalue the lives of black girls.

Chapter 4, “Interracial *Loving*: Sexlessness in the Suburbs of the 1960s,” uses the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of *Loving v. Virginia*—the Supreme Court case that struck down the Commonwealth’s “Racial Integrity Act” prohibiting intermarriage and all extant antimiscegenation laws—to reflect on television’s tentative treatment of interracial romance, from the famous *Star Trek* kiss that wasn’t to *Another World*’s celibate, mixed-race fiancés who “didn’t” and *The Jeffersons*’ “Oreo-cookie” neighbors who “did,” giving fodder to George Jefferson’s endless jokes about their mixed marriage and “zebra” offspring. In as much as 2017 also marks the fiftieth anniversary of my graduation from an overwhelmingly white high school, the chapter likewise rummates on my own experiences with dating and teenage social life in the suburbs.

Drawing its title from a haunting phrase in Hattie McDaniel’s Oscar acceptance speech in 1940, chapter 5, “‘A Credit to My Race’: Acting Black and Black Acting from *Julia* to *Scandal*,” explores the burden of racial representation that fell on the shoulders of early black actors like McDaniel, who briefly played Beulah on the 1950s TV series as well as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. McDaniel, who considered herself a race woman, was virtually excommunicated from the race by the NAACP and was panned in much of the black press for furthering demeaning stereotypes. Pioneering black actors of the 1960s and 1970s like Diahann Carroll, who played the title role in the sitcom *Julia*, and Esther Rolle and John Amos, who costarred as husband and wife in *Good Times*, faced similar challenges as national symbols and representative bodies. Attending in different degrees to these and other groundbreaking sitcoms and dramas, the chapter uses biography, autobiography, and interviews to examine the complex dynamics of race, class, gender, and social politics that played out as much behind the camera as in front. The racial anxiety of influence that once haunted black performers is considered in comparison to Kerry Washington’s unabashedly wicked, hypersexually explicit role in the ABC drama *Scandal*, where for good or ill positively representing the race is no longer a concern for the series’ award-winning star and its black female creator and producer, Shonda Rhimes—at least not in the way it once was.

The lives of black people are disappeared rather than overtly demeaned in the legal detective drama probed in chapter 6, “A Clear and Present Absence: *Perry Mason* and the Case of the Missing ‘Minorities,’” even as the series’ white star, the magnificent character actor Raymond Burr, seems to have deluded himself that his show particularly benefited “the minorities,” who he says learned by watching *Perry Mason* that “the system of justice was for them.”¹⁷ Exposing Burr’s contention as historical revisionism, chapter 6 offers an admitted fan’s cross-examination of the racial risk aversion that countenanced only a handful of African Americans on a show about justice whose nine-year run from 1957 to 1966 directly coincided with the civil rights movement. Far from part of its subject matter, African American “minorities” are at most a present absence in the *Perry Mason* series, called up—with two notable exceptions—in only a few bit parts as local color, including a nonspeaking role in which an absently present black judge seems to mistake moot court for mute court. Against the backdrop of the movement *Perry Mason* ignored, the chapter takes note of the multiracial cast of Hollywood stars who actively championed the cause of equal rights, as well as the racial dimensions and heartbreaking lessons of my family’s first trip through the segregated South into the belly of the beast of Jim Crow during the summer of 1960.

Chapter 7, “‘Soaploitation’: Getting Away with Murder in Prime Time,” takes its precolonial title from a mashup of two genres—TV soap operas and blaxploitation films—deployed to denote a new category of shows featuring black actors in leading roles and/or predominantly multiracial casts acting up in over-the-top, twisted plots and endless sexcapades, which seems to me a fitting descriptive for a program like *How to Get Away with Murder*. The chapter posits the series’ lead character, a criminal defense attorney named Annalise Keating (Viola Davis), as the would-be successor to Perry Mason, although Keating is more err apparent than heir, more criminal than defense attorney. Considering *Murder* in a reflexive relationship with the white British melodrama *Downton Abbey*, the chapter offers a close reading of *Murder*’s narrative complexity and problematic style of emplotment, as I interrogate my own pleasure in one series and at best ambivalence about the other. Can long-form Arc TV as the so-called new literature and the new novel stand up to the rigors of close reading that are the hallmark of critical analysis? While implicitly addressing this question, the chapter also checks in on my own unraveling family drama, momentarily held together by collaborative work with the local front of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty and our volunteer efforts as Democrats in the 1966 senatorial campaign of the black Republican Ed Brooke.

From the outrageous fortunes of soaploitation fictions, chapter 8, “The Punch and *Judge Judy* Shows: Really Real TV and the Dangers of a Day in Court,” moves on and into the even more racially exploitative domain of reality TV courtrooms. While the ethical affronts to jurisprudence and the rule of law portrayed in *How to Get Away with Murder* operate within the realm of the imaginary, *Judge Judy* and other arbitration series actively promote themselves as “real”: “real litigants, real cases.” This chapter argues that therein lies the danger of such shows: their real litigants are disproportionately the poor, colored, uneducated, unemployed, wretched of the earth—not just real people with real problems but real people who are the real problem—the teeming masses of welfare frauds ruining the country, immigrant and colored interlopers specifically cast as “Obama welfare cheats” in the oft-repeated right-wing rhetoric of conservative talk radio and TV and elsewhere in the digital sphere. I argue here that in their unrelenting representations of stigmatic blackness and racialized deviance, these courtroom melodramas and other forms of reality and tabloid TV fan the flames of anti-immigrant and antiminority hate-mongering that heat up national campaigns to do away with political correctness and return America to the truly disadvantaged, silenced majority.

Considering Bill Cosby’s spectacular fall from grace in the context of earlier evidence of a flagrant disregard for marriage, wife, woman, and perhaps especially “daughter,” chapter 9, “The Autumn of His Discontent: Bill Cosby, Fatherhood, and the Politics of Palatability,” argues that the principle of black respectability may be the lever that elevated an alleged sexual predator above suspicion and silenced the cries of rape that so often have led to black men being lynched. The chapter cross-examines Cosby in terms of the palatable, safe, acceptable blackness of his old career as comedian and actor—from the grand good luck of landing *I Spy* in 1965 to his legendary role in *The Cosby Show* in the 1980s—and his new career as the self-appointed moral compass of the black community. It also critiques the ways in which the narrative of Cosby’s faultless fatherhood was doubly disrupted in September 1997 by the near simultaneous death of a son and public revelation of a putative daughter, Autumn Jackson, with a woman not his wife. Additionally, as a counterpoint to Cosby’s blighted family narrative, this penultimate chapter closes out my own familial history as we have moved from a gang of five to two, on the one hand, and a domestic diaspora of a different sort, on the other, spreading now unto its fifth generation.

In the relatively short time that I have been working on this project as a book proper, more unarmed black men, women, and children than I can count have been killed by police officers and others who, like George Zim-

merman, have taken the law into their own hands.¹⁸ These terrible facts and figures would make writing about TV fictions a trivial pursuit were it not for the insidious connection between these fictions and those awful facts. More than a meditation on game shows, sitcoms, syndi-courts, and soaploitation melodramas, *Technicolored* is a book about racial representation, and that, I argue most explicitly in this final chapter, can be a killing force. Chapter 10, then, “The ‘Thug Default’: Why Racial Representation Still Matters,” traces the meaning, use, and blackening of the term “thug” and attempts to demonstrate how televisual image-making, which compulsively stigmatizes the colored Other, functions as a potentially deadly form of racial profiling.

To contend that image is ideology—that what we see on the TV screen colors how we see black boys on the street—is not simply to indulge an old, worn-out argument about positive and negative representation. Nor is it to suggest that audiences are mindless automatons who swallow whole everything they see on the screen—large or small (where “small” these days is often sixty or seventy inches). Rather, it is to consider critically the practical consequences of what media theorists have contended for decades in claiming television as a major conveyance through which prevailing notions of racial, class, and gender difference are both constituted and carried out into the main and minor streams. Race matters at least in part because TV matters, because images matter. I keep thinking about the Frank Capra romantic comedy *It Happened One Night* and all those perhaps apocryphal tales about what a glimpse of Clark Gable’s bare chest did to the undershirt in 1934. Reports abound of a precipitous drop in undershirt sales ranging from 40 to 75 percent after Gable removed his dress shirt, revealing nothing underneath during a scene with Claudette Colbert. Of course, there is no empirical evidence that proves Gable’s disrobing caused T-shirt sales to plummet, but the fact that so many have for so long believed the claim suggests the power vested in imagery. If a glimpse of white skin could do so much damage to the undershirt, perhaps we really do have to think more critically about how black skin wears on-screen.

And now, a word from our sponsors—that is, a quick note on sources. This project was greatly aided by the Internet. I do not blog, tweet, post, Snapchat, Skype, Instagram, or Facebook; I am much closer to a Luddite than to any sort of technogeek. So the ability to sit at my desk at home and watch on YouTube a sitcom I saw on television sixty years ago or, with a few clicks

of the mouse, to retrieve a barely remembered *New Yorker* review from six years ago is an oddly wonderful, yet close to anti-intellectual turn of technology for those of us so much more used to spending hours hunting down sources in the library stacks and days reading microfiche in the archives. I would be a fool not to be grateful for this modern ease of access. But there is something else the virtual world offers that is, as my Jamaican father would say, “beautiful-ugly”—beautiful for the ease of access, ugly for what one may discover when one looks. Whatever the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* or the pundits and talking heads of MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News may have to say about the state of the union and the ways of our world pales in comparison to what one can learn about her fellow man and woman from the blogs and posts of everyday Americans.

The rapid rise of the real estate baron turned reality TV star Donald Trump, slouching toward the presidency with the aid of birtherism and broadcast bigotry, was utterly unfathomable to me before I began reading online the un-American things my fellow Americans have to say about their fellow Americans. I certainly knew affirmative action and immigration were unpopular, but until I started reading the online outrage over the othered, I had no idea that such a large swath of the American populace thinks ideas like inclusion, diversity, and attention to difference are not only a tyranny of political correctness but also a serious threat to their lives, their limbs, their livelihoods, to homeland security itself. Before I discovered his propensity for blogging and tweeting, I had no idea, for example, that the game show host Pat Sajak, who says he attended a predominantly black high school in Chicago in the early 1960s where “race was a more comfortable subject” than it is today, would be among those who believe it is talking about race that generates racism—that far from a national conversation on race, what America needs is “less dialogue on the subject,” not more.¹⁹ Nor until I read his words online did I imagine that Clarence Thomas, a Supreme Court Justice who adjudicates cases of race, gender, and other forms of discrimination, would express similar disdain for the attention paid to difference today and the same kind of nostalgia for the 1960s when he, too, claims that the issue of race rarely came up. “My sadness is that we are probably today more race- and difference-conscious than I was in the 1960s when I went to school,” he reportedly told a group of college students in 2014.²⁰ Thomas’s nostalgia for the Jim Crow racial stasis of the 1960s and disdain for resistant social consciousness are especially surprising, given his position as a sitting Justice and the historical fact that a black man like him who married outside his race could not have cohabitated with his white spouse in the Commonwealth of Virginia where Thomas and

his wife now reside before the Warren Court's "race-conscious" decision in *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967, which struck down long-standing statutes prohibiting intermarriage.

I used to live by the borrowed creed that I would defend to the death the free speech rights of those with whom I disagree. But laissez-faire notions of to each his own cannot stand unchallenged where those in power promulgate dangerous ideas such as the banning and "extreme vetting" of those othered in the name of homeland security, which in the past has given the world concentration camps and crematoria, exclusion acts and internment camps, apartheid and McCarthyism. What is it they say about those who do not learn from the past? Forget history. If you want to know what evil lurks in the hearts of men, turn to the Internet. But in the words of Bette Davis in *All about Eve*, "Fasten your seatbelts; it's going to be a bumpy night."

What's in a Game?

QUIZ SHOWS AND THE
“PRISM OF RACE”

Does racism still exist? Of course it does, and it always will among some people, just as ignorance and evil will always exist in some. But it seems to me we've reached the point at which racism is considered, at the very least, unacceptable. We will never be able to eradicate every last vestige of it, just as we can't completely rid ourselves of any evil.

At some point, however, we have to stop looking at everything through the prism of race.

—PAT SAJAK, host of the TV game show *Wheel of Fortune*,
blogging at Ricochet.com, August 6, 2010

My mother was a great fan of TV game shows or “quiz shows,” as they were called in the 1950s. She was also remarkably good at many of them. Some of my earliest childhood memories are of watching her outplay contestants on picture and word puzzle game shows like *Concentration* in the 1950s and the original daytime version of *Wheel of Fortune* in the 1970s, which eventually became the syndicated evening series it is today, cohosted by Pat Sajak and Vanna White. Mom was a whiz at every game—from *Twenty-One* and *The \$64,000 Question* to *Password* and *Jeopardy*. *Wheel of Fortune* was her all-time favorite, however, and her greatest claim to fame. She was so phenomenally good at *Wheel* that in the latter decades of her relatively long life, family,

friends, and neighbors would gather in her den weeknights between 7:30 and 8:00 to watch Gramma Pearl, as she became known in the neighborhood, solve puzzles from the comfort of her recliner faster than Vanna White could turn the letters on the puzzle board.

Ironically, though, it was this very puzzle-solving prowess that ultimately caused my mother to quit *Wheel of Fortune* cold turkey in the late 1990s and never watch another episode of her once-beloved show. She was so good at the game that it just became too frustrating when the actual contestants failed to solve what for her were easy puzzles, especially and most particularly when those contestants were black. She had endured decades of white folks' fumbles, shaking her head in disapproval, yet watching and playing on while simultaneously knitting or working a crossword puzzle in ink, usually cheering on the best competitor or the underdog or the good sport or the player who happened to hail from our neck of the woods. But as more black contestants appeared on the show, rooting for the home team took on new meaning and became a kind of racial imperative. If a brother or sister flubbed the obvious, misreading a fully completed puzzle as "WORLD'S LARGEST DESSERT" instead of "DESERT," for example, or "I HAVE NOT YET BEGIN TO FIGHT," instead of "BEGUN," it was more than just a shame, like those darn Yankees beating our beloved Red Sox; it was shame—shame on all our shoulders.

Having grown up in foster care and been forced by circumstances beyond her control to leave high school in her junior year and get a job, my mother knew well the structural inequities and educational disparities that turned *desert* to *dessert* and *begun* to *begin*. Her seemingly unsympathetic response to the verbal faults and epic fails of black contestants was the by-product of an even deeper understanding of the metonymic nature of American racism by which any black is every black—not an individual but a stereotype. The patience and humility she otherwise modeled for her offspring were overridden by the reigning ideology of racial uplift and what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, who coined the phrase, identifies as "the politics of respectability," although it would be unfair of me to apply the concept to my parents without addressing the contradictions of their particular prescriptions and proscriptions for being black in the white world.¹ On the face of it, my mother, like many African Americans of her generation, believed that every black man, woman, and child should put his or her best foot forward at all times in order to present colored people to the world as capable and accomplished. Inconsequential as a game-show appearance might seem, the white world was watching one and judging all. It was essential, therefore, that the colored contestant show well—win, lose, or draw—that is, speak well, dress well, play well (even