or euphoria, must be mindful of textual and contextual mediations as they engage with melodrama's sense-making possibilities in reel and real life.

BOOK DATA Juan Sebastián Ospina León, *Struggles for Recognition: Melodrama and Visibility in Latin American Silent Film.* University of California Press, 2021. $85 hardcover; $34.95 paper; $ 34.95 e-book. 266 pages.

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BRANDY MONK-PAYTON

The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom, **by Alfred L. Martin Jr.**

Black-cast sitcoms are back. During July 2020, streaming giant Netflix put programs like *Moesha* (UPN, 1996–2001), *Sister, Sister* (ABC, 1994–95; The WB, 1995–99), *Half & Half* (UPN, 2002–6), *Girlfriends* (UPN, 2000–6; The CW, 2006–8), *The Game* (The CW, 2006–9; BET, 2006–15), and more on the roster. In a similar but different vein, HBO Max premiered a reunion special of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC, 1990–96) on November 19, 2020. Both lucrative programming moves capitalized on black nostalgia for the beloved situation comedies of the 1990s and early 2000s in the midst of global Black Lives Matter protests and calls for Hollywood to commit to diversity, equity, and inclusion. These series, some of which might not have aged well, still provide joy and laughter to Black audiences. The renewed popular interest in such television fare on the part of the entertainment industry perfectly aligns with the release of Alfred L. Martin Jr.'s extensive academic look at some of these programs in his book *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom*. Importantly, Martin interrogates how and why the television medium (dis)engages with black gayness through the Black-cast sitcom.

The Generic Closet is an exciting and vital entry into on media-industries scholarship, a field that is also at the intersection of queer TV studies and Black TV studies. At the heart of the book is Martin's conceptualization of "the generic closet." The generic closet refers to both the status of queer subjectivity and the role of genre. When considered in conjunction with the Black-cast sitcom, the hegemony of the generic closet becomes an efficient and effective industrial strategy to manage black gayness on television through marketing, scheduling, and other commercial imperatives of the medium.

The book's introduction provides its theoretical scaffolding. In these pages, Martin intervenes in the whiteness of gay 1990s television culture and criticism by examining the mediating influence of black gayness on Black-cast sitcoms. The relative scarcity of sustained black gay stories on TV confirms that they are always already seen as risky endeavors. He argues that during episodes in which Black gay characters actually do appear in Black-cast sitcoms, their trajectories follow a three-act structure of detection, discovery/declaration, and discarding (15). Moreover, Martin attests that the television industry erroneously understands the Black audience as a homophobic monolith. As he suggests, "the precarity of Black-cast series coupled with the imagined conservatism of Black audiences rebuilds the generic closet over and over again" (56).

The Generic Closet focuses on specific episodes of five different Black-cast sitcoms that premiered on both small networks and basic cable: *Moesha, Good News* (UPN 1997–98), *All of Us* (UPN, 2003–7), *Let's Stay Together* (BET, 2011–14), and *Are We There Yet?* (TBS, 2010–12). Each chapter discusses these programs from different angles, going beyond the realm of representation to issues of production and reception. Indeed, while attentive to textual analysis (specifically in the third chapter's close reading of the use of the laugh track), Martin is more interested in approaching the study of the Black-cast sitcom through detailed examinations of both industry and audience. Thus, methodologically, he supplements his discursive account of Black television by including in-depth interviews with media workers like *Moesha* showrunner Ralph Farquhar and *Good News* creator Edward "Ed." Weinberger, as well as an array of Black gay TV viewers. As Martin remains grounded in the material realities of production and reception, the insights from these creatives and fans enhances the book's argument on the generic closet.

The first chapter begins by deftly describing historical developments in the television industry with respect to Black-cast sitcoms in the postnetwork era. Martin situates their emergence on-screen within industry lore that imagines the viewing demographic of Black audiences as anti-gay, based on religion and music. Indeed, one interesting observation is that the emergence of hip-hop and a particular brand of heterosexual patriarchal masculinity pervaded black television productions and curtailed the conditions of possibility for Black gayness to appear on-screen in alternative and generative ways. Martin combines trade press reports and his own frank conversations with industry

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insiders to discuss how "the Black-cast sitcom constructed, reconstructed, and reified its generic closet" (63).

The second chapter turns to the site of the writers' room and delves into how television creatives work within the industrial and discursive confinement of the generic closet. Martin interviews five writers and four showrunners of Black-cast sitcoms to gain insight into their experiences navigating the production of Black gay characters. Though these creatives have a modicum of agency in their jobs, their position inside the generic closet results in the decentering of Black gay story lines (74).

A book about the sitcom genre must contend with the function of humor, and the third chapter takes on the formal qualities of the Black-cast sitcom through an analysis of the laugh track. Martin offers close readings of episodes in which the figure of the comic is exemplified by the Black gay man. In these episodes, "the ideological machinations of the laugh track" dictate how audiences encounter Black gayness as marginal or "other" and thereby reinscribe heteronormative values (139). The fourth chapter, "Black Queens Speak," turns from questions of aesthetics to questions of audience and gives voice to Black gay viewers, tracking how they make meaning from these televisual texts that fleetingly feature Black gay characters. The men interviewed have complicated relationships to the sitcom images of Black gayness, deriving pleasure from such images while also scrutinizing them. They are aware of the highly constructed nature of the Black-cast sitcom; for example, the queens provide an "oppositional reading of the laugh track" (177) that highlights its fundamentally conventional quality that upholds a heterosexual status quo. Martin practices an ethics of care in his approach to reception and centers the humanity of his interview subjects as they generate new critical knowledge by sharing their stories and viewing practices.

The book's conclusion highlights the generic closet's persistence within the Black-cast sitcom and television more broadly, with a well-rounded account of Black television that extends the work of scholars Herman Gray, Jennifer Fuller, Kristen Warner, Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, and Timothy Havens, among others. *The Generic Closet* will be of interest to academics in the field of television studies and even a general audience that enjoys reading oral histories of underexamined or forgotten programs. Martin creates an accessible archive of Black gayness on the small screen. The book helpfully features an appendix that lists all Black gay characters in Black-cast sitcoms between 1977 and 2014 and the episodes they appeared in, which is a great resource for further research on the topic.

Indeed, there's much still to be explored with respect to the Black-cast sitcom's treatment of sexuality in the contemporary moment. Martin is exclusively concerned with Black gay men; Black lesbians are not part of his rendering of the generic closet. This is in large part due to television's politics of representation—which, as Sasha Torres once noted, "excludes black women from the frame." One is left to wonder how the generic closet manifests itself with regard to Black lesbianism in Black-cast sitcoms.

In a season 1 episode of *Black-ish* (ABC, 2014–), Dre's sister Rhonda (Raven-Symoné) comes to visit the Johnson family. Titled "Please Don't Ask, Please Don't Tell," the episode follows the same narrative pattern of detection, discovery/declaration, and discarding that Martin describes throughout his book. Members of the family speculate about Rhonda being gay. In a turn of events, it is Dre who outs Rhonda to their homophobic mother, who tenuously comes to accept her daughter's sexuality and engagement to another woman. The adult version of Rhonda then appears in a season 2 episode that notably features her same-sex wedding.

Martin's pathbreaking work can be applied to *Black-ish* as a single-camera Black-cast sitcom with no laugh track. In this way, *The Generic Closet* gives readers a language to describe the pernicious industrial strategy as a structure for containing Black gayness—something that the television industry and audiences still cannot seem to escape.

BOOK DATA Alfred L. Martin Jr., *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. $70.16 cloth, $23.99 paper, $14.74 e-book. 242 pages.

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