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“How much longer are they gonna treat us like animals? The American correctional system is built on the backs of our brothers, our fathers and our sons. How much longer? It's a system that must be dismantled piece by piece if we are to live up to those words that we recite with our hands on our hearts. Justice for all. Not justice for some, but justice for all. How much longer?”—Cookie Lyons, “Empire” (2015)

“[The] artist's role is to raise the consciousness of the people....Otherwise I don't know why you do it.”—Amiri Baraka¹

- ¹ In 1969, Larry Neal, one of the most visible black writers of his generation, emerged as a chief exponent of a new artistic movement that was unfolding alongside the Black Power Movement. For those curious about it, he explained that art had a critical role in the Black Freedom Movement² as a force to complement grassroots activism and political struggle. Black artists were intimately connected to, and profoundly aware of, the black freedom struggle; and their work reflected this familiarity. “The Black Arts Movement,” Neal noted,

is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. The movement...speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of black America. In order to perform the task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconography.³

- ² Throughout the United States a new black mood coalesced around aesthetes who formulated new and audacious articulations of identity and politics that resonated with wider black America. The Black Arts Movement (BAM) would have an indelible impact on the cultural landscape of the country. It transformed the arts and literature in innumerable ways from theatre, to murals, fashion, and more.
- ³ A half-century after Neal's decree, there has been an unprecedented explosion of black arts in the United States, exceeding the depth, scope, reach and influence of the BAM,

while simultaneously adhering to the fundamental political sensibilities that made the movement a distinct historical moment. As television has become a hyper-visible medium for this modern expression, the opportunities for majority-black cast television shows have grown considerably. There has been a record number of black shows and, for the first time, majority black dramas that have simultaneously aired more than one season. These shows, both comedies and dramas, have largely become creative spaces to showcase black creative work from music, through dance, literature and visual arts. Significantly, too, they engage major political issues that resonate in the black community, from sexuality, and gentrification, to class conflict, and police brutality. In fact, most black shows have explicitly or implicitly addressed the Black Lives Matter movement—the largest black social justice movement in decades. Several have been as direct as to mention, by name, some of those unarmed black people killed and victimized by police. Ultimately, black artists in TV have forged a moment in history that is not only unprecedented in black visibility, but uncharted in political expression. This movement embraces many of the fundamental tenets of the Black Arts Movement, moving into a creative cultural medium that has increased visibility and reach in ways few would have imagined a half-century earlier.

- 4 In what ways have these new expressions of black art in television aligned with the impulse of the BAM? How has the most recent generation of writers, directors and showrunners made critical connections between entertainment and the politics of the wider black community? Can these television shows—targeted to a multi-racial audience—prove commercially viable as platforms of black social and political expression? To what degree can commercially viable TV speak of and be in dialogic form with a broad-based black political movement like Black Lives Matter—even if that movement is unpopular among most whites? How do these shows reflect the evolving gendered readings and representations of blackness? This paper explores the development, technological and market dynamics that have given rise to a new space for black television, and, simultaneously, a new space for the expression of black political art.

1. History of Blacks on TV

- 5 In the earliest days of television in the United States, race functioned as it had in other, more conventional, spaces for American popular culture. Whiteness was a normative expression of the range of the human experience. White characters appeared as leading men, beautiful and desired women, smart, virtuous, industrious, and brave. They also appeared as scoundrels, villains, ugly, dumb, stupid, servile, and cowardly. People of color—from Native Americans, through Asians and black people—were never afforded this range, and, instead, were largely absent, or used as background props to white-centered narratives. Despite short-lived shows like “The Hazel Scott Show (the summer of 1950), or “The Nat ‘King’ Cole Show” (1956-1957), the vast majority of scripted black images on TV were narrowly constructed. In the role as supporting characters, they generally operated as servants, like Rochester of the “Jack Benny Program” (1949-1965) or “Beulah” (1950-1952). In 1951 the wildly popular radio show, “Amos ‘n Andy,” was adapted for TV for CBS. In its original format, two white actors provided voices for the black characters who were derived from classic minstrel, blackface routines. When “Amos ‘n Andy” aired in 1951 with black actors, they remained little more than coarse caricatures. NAACP protests led CBS to temper the offensive nature, while still satisfying the demands of its

largely white audience. In 1953 the show was cancelled, yet remained in syndication until the dawn of the Black Power Movement in 1966.⁴

2. Black Nationalism

- 6 By the early 1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement unfolded, projecting new, real-time images of black people as civilized, peaceful, well-dressed citizens facing down the ignorant, mean-spirited and savage forces of white supremacy. From the neatly-dressed and youthful activists like Julian Bond and Ruby Doris Smith speaking to national media, or peaceful high school children facing down water hoses and police dogs in Birmingham, these hopeful agents of integration and racial reconciliation stood in contrast to images of black people long propagated in popular culture as servile, lazy, feckless, and content with subordination to whites. For the long-suffering, indolent Negroes idealized in white popular art, the civil rights activists and their national leadership proved anathema. Simultaneously, another image of blackness entered the popular gaze, challenging white artistic caricatures as well as those on the front lines of civil disobedience. These black nationalists were sartorially identical to their integrationist counterparts; however, ideologically, they vitriolically disagreed with integrationists, with a fervor equal to their criticism of racist whites who opposed civil rights.
- 7 There had been no single national figure more prominent than Malcolm X in fomenting the Black Power Movement. As the Civil Rights Movement unfolded, Malcolm emerged as the most vocal black critic of its ambitions. The national spokesman for the Nation of Islam (NOI), the largest black nationalist group in the country, Malcolm castigated the idea that black people should sacrifice their safety to integrate with whites who were their “open enemies.” White people’s history of committing vast crimes and abuses against humanity—rape, enslavement, genocide, lies, terrorism, state-sanctioned violence and oppression—was evidence of the futility of integration, the NOI argued. Black people, Malcolm believed, would be best served forming their own nation, separate and distinct from whites and their wicked ways.⁵
- 8 Malcolm often discussed the internalization of black self-hate and ideas surrounding black aesthetics. As he noted, black people were not only denied access to schools, but when they did have access, those school books either erased or maligned black people. Black people were denied access to the professional spaces in which popular culture was institutionalized in TV and film, even if they were present in grotesque caricatures for popular consumption. Images of a full complexity of black life and humanity were denied; and black beauty was oxymoronic. He asked an audience in 1963, “Who taught you to hate the color of your skin? Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? Who taught you to hate your own kind?”⁶
- 9 While the minister chastened black people for capitulating to white popular culture and its anti-black expressions, he also mocked whites in a range of ways. Echoing the Nation of Islam’s de-pedestalization of whiteness, Malcolm ridiculed “Negro” supplicants to white supremacy who had been so in love with their oppressors that they wanted to be like them. They even applied toxins to approximate their oppressors’ “animal-like” appearance, from skin whitener, to lye and painful hair-straightening rituals. They

wanted to be like the “pig-colored” white man, have his dog-like “snout” of a nose and his “dog-like” hair.⁷ Whites had never been as publicly ridiculed in the history of the United States.

- 10 While there were strains of the Black Freedom Movement that ridiculed whiteness and white people for a range of deficiencies, from morality to beauty, rhythm, and hygiene, the core thrust of the movement—inherited from Malcolm—was not about hating whites. It was, as, cultural studies scholar Reiland Rabaka states, “about *loving* black people, and defending them against anti-black racist assaults...both physical and psychological.”⁸ But, not only was the denunciation of whiteness anathema to the Civil Rights Movement, the thrust of a conspicuous celebration of black beauty was also a departure from the movement, which did very little explicit promotion of black pride. Centered on philosophies of racial reconciliation, integration and common humanity, the fundamental basis of the movement was, of course, legal, not social or cultural in nature. The Civil Rights Movement aimed to realize legal rights for all citizens. And that legal drive was the destruction of laws that prevented access to voting, justice, schools, hospitals, parks and every type of public accommodation. Generally, driven by integrationist ambition, the modern Civil Rights Movement was not theoretically congruent with the *mélange* of social, political and cultural blackness in the Black Power Movement.⁹
- 11 Malcolm profoundly resonated with a younger demographic of black people who listened to his lectures and read his speeches. Many joined the NOI or remained on its fringes, attending local Temples of Islam. Many others, however, were not willing to convert to the Nation of Islam, or commit to its stringent lifestyle demands, or believe all of its dogma. Many, for example, did not agree that whites were biologically and immutably wicked. But the foundational elements of his message were compelling, particularly the exaltation of black pride, and self-determination. A list of those who praised him or who credit him for influencing them reads like a who’s who of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements: Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, Maulana Karenga, Eldridge Cleaver, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), Kalamu ya Salaam, and Nikki Giovanni among them.¹⁰

3. Black Power Movement

- 12 Malcolm X broke from the NOI in 1964, converted to Sunni Islam, aligned with radical whites and many non-African Americans, and was assassinated in 1965. A year later, the Black Power Movement emerged, asserting the importance of three foundational components among an otherwise ideologically diverse movement: black pride, the right to black self-determination, and self-defense. Far from monolithic, various permutations of Black Power manifested themselves in diverse organizational forms, such as revolutionary nationalist groups like the Black Panther Party, and the Revolutionary Action Movement, to the Black Student Movement, which fundamentally transformed higher education across the United States. Black students formed black cultural centers, black student unions, demanded more black faculty, staff and students. And, importantly, they demanded a new academic field of study: black studies. In this process they realized an expansion of epistemological boundaries, forging new points of inquiry and approaches to study. There were, of course, many critics, black and white, to these efforts. Integrationist civil rights leaders like NAACP head Roy Wilkins, decried “reverse segregation” and “black Jim Crow studies,” insisting that it would leave black students ill-

prepared after graduation.¹¹ Academics who valued the core thrust of Black Power, like Nathan Hare, challenged Wilkins, explaining in 1969 that the forceful Black Power demands from students “for more black professors and black students have padded white colleges with more blacks in two years than the decades of whimpering for ‘integration’ ever did.”¹² The first of racial and ethnic studies programs, black studies was followed by women’s studies, Latinx Studies, Asian American studies, and gender and sexuality studies programs and departments. These institutions, over the succeeding decades hired faculty, trained scholars, made important contributions to various disciplines and established professional associations across the globe.¹³

- 13 It may seem ironic that this movement to increase the black presence in white spaces was not orchestrated by civil rights integrationists. What is critical to note in the exponential increase of black faculty, staff and students at white colleges and universities is that these Black Power exponents demanded *black self-determinative* institutions *within* these campuses. These students formed black organizations, homecoming courts, dorms and even separate graduation ceremonies in some schools. In contrast, the integrationist drive, for many in the Civil Rights Movement, idealized and envisioned a melting pot scenario as evidence of their struggle’s greatest achievement. Black people, they hoped, would be intimately woven into the fabric of the United States, as had various European ethnic groups. Black power, however, insisted on the same access to resources and citizenship that was afforded whites, but did not demand nor seek any amalgamation or dissolution into white spaces. Blackness and black people were too beautiful, too valuable, too worthy to be lost in a sea of whiteness. Their institutions, cultural, and religious work and expressions were too precious to be forfeited to whites as the cost for integration. Desegregation, on the other hand, granted access, while black people could simultaneously maintain a degree of self-determination and control over their social, intellectual, religious, and professional work.¹⁴
- 14 Across the United States, black power made critical interventions in the mainstream in ways not envisioned by integrationists of the Civil Rights Movement who viewed integration as a “promised land” for people of color. The reach of black power was vast, affecting every facet of black life. Because racism’s toxicity reached black people across professional, private and public arenas, black resistive work similarly found expression in multivalent ways. The hostility to black development in most professions prompted African Americans to forge professional associations in these respective fields, facilitating greater mentorship, opportunities, and leadership. African Americans faithfully saw the power of such efforts to reform space—even those spaces and institutions under the control of white people. The faith in this level of agency contrasts with what scholars like Frank B. Wilderson call “Afro-Pessimism,” who argue that only the “revolution that will destroy civil society as we know it would be a more adequate response” than the efforts done by these activists. Wilderson insists, that “a lot of repression happens on the level of representation, which then infiltrates the unconscious of both the black and the white person. Since these structures are ontological, they cannot be resolved (there is no way of changing this unless the world as we know it comes an end...).”¹⁵ On the matter of “representation,” artists have fundamentally operated against this thesis, believing, instead, that they can offer critical and powerful counterhegemonic representations that subvert anti-blackness. The scope of this belief was so vast that it emerged as a movement of its own.

4. Black Arts Movement

- 15 The black nationalist thrust and its explicit celebration of black beauty, black history and identity inexorably affected young black artists. Blackness was not deficient or incomplete without whites. Black humanity, they argued, was always whole, and appealing to whites for integration was not going to make black people free. Access to resources and black control of institutions that were essential to their healthy survival was real freedom. As writer Ishmael Reed explains, young black artists “gave the example that you don’t have to assimilate. You could do your own thing, get into your own background, your own history, your own tradition and your own culture. I think the challenge is for cultural sovereignty and Black Arts struck a blow for that.”¹⁶ Nationally, the reverberations of this new consciousness took root. Various organizations formed in the BAM that nurtured, trained, and inspired black artists in the performance arts in particular. From the fine arts students at historically black colleges and universities like Howard University, to the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School and Negro Ensemble in New York, the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles, or the Black Ensemble Theater Company in Chicago, black actors, writers, theatre and film technicians sharpened their professional skills, positioning themselves to take advantages of expanded opportunities in TV and film.
- 16 The political thrust of Black Power understood the utility of the arts, including literature—especially in its commodified and corporate mediated form—as an extension of white domination. Consequently, artists found particular value in the words of Frantz Fanon who wrote about the important role that writers have in liberation movements: “[T]he native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether [to charm] or [denounce] him through ethnic or subjective means; now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people.” This is what Fanon referred to as “a literature of combat, in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation.”¹⁷ Across the United States, black people utilized culture as a strategic tool in a multi-faceted freedom movement. It pulled from an array of sources and intellectual traditions spanning generations. The work was constitutive of an eclectic *mélange* of modalities, media and folk expressions, even in its efforts to carve out innovative interpretative and expressive work. As Kalamu ya Salaam, a BAM-era writer noted, “do not necessarily be like / anything you heard before & / yet it will still sound familiar.”¹⁸
- 17 In Los Angeles Maulana Karenga emerged as the most visible cultural nationalist on the West Coast. As co-founder and head of the organization Us, Karenga promoted the philosophy of Kawaida, which “called for the reclamation of black Americans’ African past and identity through a set of cultural, social, and political practices based in the African value system.”¹⁹ On the East Coast, playwright, poet and black nationalist Amiri Baraka established a strategic and ideological partnership with Karenga and Us, adopting Kawaida as a guiding philosophy for his work in Spirit House, a Newark-based home for the arts and political organization.²⁰ While Karenga and Baraka emerged as two of the most visible adherents of the cultural nationalist thrust of the BAM, the movement was much more than these two. Across the country black young people embraced the hallmarks of black power aesthetics: bubas or dashikis, African names, and natural hair styles.

- 18 Like the larger Black Power Movement, the BAM, was not ideologically monolithic, despite the general belief that culture played an essential component to the black liberation. Kawaida, for example, insisted on the revitalization of African culture among black people in America, while others like the Black Panther Party had regarded African-centered culture as politically impuissant. In 1969, Linda Harrison, a Black Panther, dismissed cultural nationalism, writing that too many have been duped into believing “there is a dignity inherent in wearing naturals; that a buba makes a slave a man; and that a common language – Swahili—makes us all brothers.” The monetization and swift capitalist exploitation of cultural nationalism, she explained, evinced its impotence. The “power structure...condones and even worships anything that is harmless and presents no challenge to the existing order.”²¹ And, despite her androcentric references above, many Panthers attacked the cultural nationalist followers of Kawaida for their revisionist notions of African patriarchy.
- 19 The Black Panther Party, which had its own internal debates and struggles around patriarchy and sexism, had, by late 1968 (two years after its founding) become mostly female and instituted policies against sexism within its ranks. Women led chapters of the BPP across the country and were central all programs, from its newspapers, to free breakfast, and health centers. In 1970 the BPP became the first national black co-ed organization to publicly endorse both the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the Gay Liberation Movement.²² Unlike the organizations that Karenga and Baraka led, the Panthers did not demand that women and men operate in separate spheres. As historian Ashley Farmer details, followers of Kawaida, “steeped in idealism, and the prevailing patriarchy of the day...originally defined the African Woman as an activist who induced cultural revolution through child rearing, education, and homemaking.”²³ As major exponents of the belief that culture can move the people closer to liberation, many women within the Kawaidist tradition challenged what was, in essence, a replication of the dominant white standards of patriarchy. In fact, across the United States, white society—its religious, educational, political, military and police institutions—were rigidly patriarchal and homophobic (not to mention racist). It is remarkable that Kawaida’s female cult of domesticity was heralded as defiant to white cultural values. As many women activists observed, these values were more aligned with white Victorianism than a modern liberation movement.²⁴
- 20 In the late 1960s black women across the country were agents of a wide expanse of activist work, and increasingly vocal about and resistive to being relegated to the margins of any struggle—cultural or otherwise. Given the ubiquity of their critical work, the conventional proscriptions to place women in their “natural” space in the home fell out of favor. The Kawaidists in Us in 1969 wrote that “Black Men [were] inspired by Black women who are capable of carrying on the revolution in their absence... [and] inspired even more by Black women who can carry on the revolution in their presence.”²⁵ By 1974 both Baraka and Karenga, perhaps inspired (or prodded) by their memberships within their respective organizations, firmly denounced sexism and revised their dictums regarding gender. Karenga wrote that black people cannot be free until they purge “sexism [and] male chauvinism” from their communities. Baraka, who offended many whites with vitriolic writings and speeches, argued that patriarchy and racist animus were “counterrevolutionary” and that, instead, an advanced, sophisticated politics of freedom must denounce “reactionary chauvinism either racial or sexual.”²⁶ For a movement aimed to disrupt European cultural standards and values, the irony was not

lost on how some cultural nationalists had simply dressed conventional white American cultural standards in superficial African trappings. The power of this historical moment, however, demonstrates that these young activists and artists were not static, but open to debate, revise, and reconsider their politics.

- 21 Reiland Rabaka outlines the tensions in the BAM as artists attempted to disrupt old notions of cultural normativity that were, essentially, racist *and* sexist. Viewing the movement from a black feminist or womanist interpretation, therefore, “moves past the tired tendency to concentrate on the more male-dominated organizations and institutions.” Women, from Jayne Cortez, Gloria House, Sonia Sanchez, to Elma Lewis, Gwendolyn Brooks and Nikki Giovanni made foundational cultural expressions—from plays to novels—to the era.²⁷ The efforts to make critical contributions to the political struggle of black people through art was fundamental to the BAM. And that advancement could not abandon half of the black community. Women were involved at every stage—even in the face of opposition. Their works, like Toni Cade Bambara’s anthology *The Black Woman*, or *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, added depth, dimension, and served as testimonies to the centrality of women in the wider black community and its freedom movement. Angelou, Bambara, Baraka, Neal, and scores of others introduced into national consciousness cultural works that challenged and critiqued various forms of oppression, while proving dynamic and agile enough to respond to the shifting social and political circumstances from which they emerged. They remained tethered to the wider black community, and politically and artistically adapted to new exigencies and opportunities.
- 22 The celebrated intellectual and writer James Baldwin, who was older than the literary figures of the BAM, had a dialogue in 1971 with one of the most visible figures of the movement, Nikki Giovanni, on the PBS television series “SOUL!” Giovanni respected Baldwin, as did many of her generation. In recognizing their relationship as writers across generations, tied by a constant utilization of art as a tool of freedom work, Baldwin noted that artists bear a particular challenge and responsibility to the people who consume their work. But as a black artist, in particular, the challenge is made more acute when the artist forges a counterhegemonic aesthetic as many in the Black Arts Movement did. He explained that, “it’s hard for anybody, but it’s very hard if you’re born black in a white society. Hard, because you’ve got to divorce yourself from the standards of that society.”²⁸ The elder writer also offered a caveat about the copious celebration of blackness in commodified forms. “The danger of your generation, if I may say so ... is to substitute one romanticism for another. Because these categories — to put it simply but with a certain brutal truth — these categories are commercial categories.”²⁹ Here Baldwin warns against the ways in which black art is appropriated, stripped of its most subversive and powerful components and meanings, and packaged for popular consumption. These “commercial categories” can also mean a base social construction of racial constructs that are, themselves, consequences of toxic racial orders that need to be destroyed, not reinforced by revised notions of blackness. Still, the utility of art as a resistive tool is clear to Baldwin who later appears to endorse Nigerian literary giant Chinua Achebe who, in a similar dialogue with Baldwin, explained the importance of political art. “Those who tell you ‘Do not put too much politics in your art’ are not being honest. If you look very carefully you will see that they are the same people who are quite happy with the situation as it is... What they are saying is don’t upset the system.”³⁰ The opportunities for

black writers to allow their politics to shape the images of blackness steadily grew from the 1970s.

5. TV in the Post-Black Power Era

- 23 Reflecting the profound cultural, and social shifts across the country during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, the 1970s witnessed an expansion, though limited, in black representation on TV. From “Sanford and Son,” through “Good Times,” “The Jeffersons,” and “What’s Happening,” black comedies emerged, often with high ratings. Generally, they had white executive producers, mostly white directors and writers. In fact, when “Good Times,” which was set in a Chicago public housing project, debuted in 1974 with an all-black cast, all of the staff writers were white. Although the creators, Eric Monte and Michael Evans, were black, the show’s white executive producer, Norman Lear, assembled an all-white team to bring the show into fruition, with depth, color, and dimension. The politics of race were evident in the earliest discussions about the cast. Lear wanted to remove James Evans, the father and husband, from the show, creating a black household with three children and a single mother in public housing. Esther Rolle, who was cast to play mother Florida Evans, protested. Rolle later argued that, “I introduced the black father to this country,” when she refused to accept the part unless there was a father to the household. This was the first time that a black main character on TV was both a father and husband. The show debuted on CBS with a white lead writer, Allan Manings, as a producer.³¹
- 24 Typical of the era, Lear assembled a team that crafted a “black” family, including its speech, interests, political sensibilities, and humor largely derived from the white imagination. This included the articulations of Michael, the youngest Evans, who was, himself a Black Power advocate, complete with dashikis and clenched fist. Jokingly referred to as the “militant midget” by his family members, Michael’s character was the political reflection of the era, though distilled through white conceptions of black power.
- 25 In the midst of the Black Arts Movement, with black playwrights, novelists, poets and other literati, the incongruence between black comedy, a black family and black politics fully conceived, written, produced and packaged by whites could not be lost. The commercial presentation of black people was, of course, how American popular culture had created images of black people since the minstrel shows of the 19th century. The political currents of the country, however, would demand more than what the white imagination offered, and the producers expanded their staff, hiring two black writers from the prestigious Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival. Michael Moye, one of the two black writers recalls the “cast was happy to see me” as a critical creative component to the narratives of the show.³²
- 26 The lack of familiarity with the lived experience of black people was so striking, recalls Moye, who remembers a white writer asking if black girls played with Barbie dolls. (They did). Moye had to also explain to the white writers that, in general, black people who were so destitute as to be forced to ask for welfare, were not gleeful, but viewed it with some degree of disappointment and embarrassment.³³ The complexity of black lives, filtered through the white imagination, was, therefore, often reduced to the limits of white exposure to black people, as well as constricted by a litany of often hostile images consumed by whites the entirety of their lives. And though there were no black dramas or even leading black characters on white-majority dramas of the decade, the dramatic

mini-series “Roots” hosted a heavily-black cast and became the most watched television miniseries in history. Based on Alex Haley’s book of the same name, “Roots,” focused on the author’s family history, traced to an enslaved African from the 18th century. It aired in January 1977 and its final episode captured an astounding 100 million viewers. In all, it became the most watched show in history to that date, ultimately honored with over 25 television awards.³⁴ With many white stars as well, the show demonstrated a breadth of black dramatic performances that was unprecedented on TV. Still, no black-led dramas resulted from the success of the miniseries.

- 27 Black characters remained largely marginal on TV shows throughout the 1980s, from “Dallas,” through “The Dukes of Hazard,” “Cheers,” and “Family Ties,” although they had become stock sideline characters in a range of dramas, from “Hill Street Blues,” and “St. Elsewhere,” and “L.A. Law,” with occasional centric stories for the black characters. Notably, however, “The White Shadow” debuted in 1978 as the first network drama with a majority black cast. Created by Ken Howard and Bruce Paltrow, two white writers, the show starred Howard as a basketball coach in a mostly black high school in South Central Los Angeles, often helping his players with personal crises outside of school. To some degree the show pandered to white savior tropes, where whites, ostensibly working in the interests of a black group, push against authority and prove to be more effective than black leaders.³⁵
- 28 The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed a range of black comedies that addressed issues in black communities with a balance of humor and light-hearted engagement. Series like “The Cosby Show,” “227,” “Family Matters,” “A Different World,” “Martin,” and “The Fresh Prince of Bel Air” were largely all-black settings, reflecting the largely segregated social reality of the United States. While they tended not to focus on explicitly black themes or make racial references like their predecessors in the 1970s, issues like police brutality, apartheid, and racism appeared in storylines for multiple shows.³⁶ Unlike the first wave of black TV shows, these series generally had black creators, executive producers, staff writers and directors. The most significant of this cohort of show was “The Cosby Show,” (1984-1992), which, itself, exhibited a high water mark in its cultural nationalist references and allusions.
- 29 “The Cosby Show” rarely explicitly engaged race in its dialogue, but was fully ensconced in a palpable black cultural space as no TV show had been theretofore, while winning dozens of awards and garnering the highest ratings on TV. With black writers, directors, creators, consultants and a black executive producer, the show, centered on the life of an upper-middle-class family, headed by a medical doctor and lawyer, featured copious amounts of African American artistic expression throughout the series’ nine-year run. Black visual artists, writers, actors, musicians and guest stars from Stevie Wonder, Dizzy Gillespie, Lena Horne through Nancy Wilson and Mariam Makeba appeared. Additionally, black institutions from colleges to Negro League baseball teams and Tuskegee Airmen were referenced.³⁷ This “Cosby Show,” though so firmly grounded in a black-centered space, eluded white discomfort or alienation by not explicitly engaging in racial matters. In many ways, it superficially adopted the “race neutral” dialogue of the majority white sitcoms, while also crafting a litany of cultural markers that reflected the race of the cast—much as white shows had done. “A Different World,” a spinoff of “The Cosby Show,” differed from its parent show by openly discussing race and a range of social issues, while simultaneously celebrating African American culture like its parent show. Real world events became important stories to episodes.

- 30 After the 1992 verdict which exonerated four L.A. police officers in the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King, several TV shows addressed the ensuing civil unrest in Los Angeles in their storylines. When “A Different World,” announced its plans to start its sixth season with a story around the L.A. Rebellion, Susan Fales-Hill, the head writer, and director Debbie Allen, both black women, faced resistance from NBC executives. After a “tense” round of debates, Allen noted that NBC and the show would likely suffer if the wider black community and its leaders thought that the network had silenced the show’s political voice. The network relented and the episodes (Parts I and II) became part of a wider historical moment in television history when escapist comedic entertainment shifted to more topical and polarizing issues.³⁸ Some may dismiss these efforts as part of what philosopher Hubert Marcuse refers to as the ability of oppressive apparatus to coopt subversive art for its own capitalist exploits.³⁹ But Allen and Fales-Hill, two black women, operating in a vastly male and white domain, saw their work as offering social and political critiques. Though their work was not revolutionary, Marcuse’s essential idea of cooption and exploitation from the controlling apparatus may have merit. The network was not offering any transformation of society, only a means to profit from detailing its problems. But the agency of the artists cannot be entirely dismissed. They are engaged in their own space to resist the pervasive anti-black representation—leading to violence—that Afro-Pessimists insist permeates society.
- 31 The covering of the urban unrest was important enough that a critic at the *New York Times* reported that the many shows that addressed the L.A. Rebellion were part of a trend of “the politicizing of TV’s prime-time comedy.”⁴⁰ It appeared that more black creative control made these shows more likely to engage the political exigencies faced by the wider black community. At the same time, however, there was tepid willingness from studio executives to fully allow substantive or regular engagement with these issues. Moreover, black shows remained relegated to comedies, often considered too light to address controversial or serious social issues. While dramas may have more creative agility, there had been no black dramas with black leads to last a season on TV. New technologies and shifting demographics, however, would indelibly change the television landscape and the politics therein after the turn of the century.

6. New Business Models, New Art

- 32 In 2013 *Wired* magazine noted that the current crop of prestige dramas in terms of quantity and quality had surpassed anything witnessed in any prior era of television. The rise of so many platforms for TV—network broadcast, basic and expanded cable, as well as new streaming forms from Netflix, Amazon, Hulu and more—has created what the magazine hails as the “platinum age of TV,” exceeding the superlative “Golden Age of TV” that many have assigned to the expansive and high quality viewing now available.⁴¹ The competition has generated the best from the creative minds of studios fighting for an audience. No era has afford a broader representation of a diversity of characters for actors of color.
- 33 In the second decade of the 21st century, the expansion of networks and channels led to disruptive business models that have fundamentally altered the “television” market. When “Good Times” debuted in 1974, there were three national networks, with a systematic effort from each to reach the widest market of viewers for high ratings and advertisement revenue. Given that roughly 83 percent of the country was white, network

executives, who were all white, created white majority shows with little to no racial diversity. And, as noted above, white executives placed creative control of people of color (almost always black people) in the hands of whites who often pandered to the gross ignorance or expectations of the wider white market. By 2013, the demographic landscape of the country, network executive leadership and consumer markets had all diversified considerably. Importantly, so many shows air simultaneously across so many different networks and platforms—from cable to streaming services—that creating a series for a general [white] audience does not have the same business advantages that it did 40 years earlier.

- 34 Given the racialized viewing patterns of TV, the shift in the delivery of shows has meant that the power of black viewership has been amplified beyond any point in history. While representing 13 percent of the country, African Americans are over 20 percent of the viewing market, consuming TV at a higher rate than any other racial/ethnic group.⁴² This means, for example, that if 100 shows are on simultaneously, and 90 are shows with all-white characters, the white target audience, evenly-divided across the shows would, theoretically, have a lower average rating than the five black-targeted shows, each, on average. In addition to black-owned and black-oriented networks like TVOne, OWN, and BET, black-targeted shows expanded rapidly on networks like Bravo, VH1, and E!, which have aired several reality shows and scripted shows with majority-black casts. Dozens of black executive producers, creators, writers, directors have animated and altered the landscape of television in scripted and reality shows.
- 35 Between 2011 and 2016, scripted television shows across various platforms increased by over 70 percent. Between 2002 and 2016, the number of television shows increased from 182 to 455 original scripted shows.⁴³ The opportunities for producers, writers, and directors of color have expanded to new levels, but the general landscape remains vastly unrepresentative of the country and viewer demographics. A 2017 report that examined “all 234 original, scripted comedy and drama series airing or streaming on 18 networks during the 2016–17 television seasons” found that “65 percent of all writers’ rooms had zero black writers, and across all shows, less than 5 percent of writers were black.” Furthermore, it found that,
- Over 90% of showrunners are white, two-thirds of shows had no Black writers at all, and another 17% of shows had just one Black writer. The ultimate result of this exclusion is **the widespread reliance on Black stereotypes to drive Black character portrayals**, where Black characters even exist at all—at best, ‘cardboard’ characters, at worst, unfair, inaccurate and dehumanizing portrayals.⁴⁴ (Emphasis in original).
- 36 While five percent of showrunners, or executives who hire and fire staff, were black, (all other people of color combined accounted for 3.9 percent of showrunners), black showrunners universally hired diverse writing staffs, including white writers, even for black shows. At the same time, however, 69 percent of white showrunners hired no black writers.⁴⁵ Though incredibly limited, the opportunities for majority-black cast television shows have resulted in a record number of black shows and, for the first time in history, majority black dramas that have simultaneously aired more than one season. These shows, ranging from comedies to dramas, have largely proved to be more than just vapid, escapist entertainment. These shows have become part of a veritable movement of black artistic expression, highlighting black culture, history, politics and more. This movement aligns closely with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s in a host of ways.

7. Black Lives Matter and Social Justice Movements

- 37 Before HBO's "The Wire," (2002-2008) no majority black drama had lasted for more than one season on network or cable TV since "The White Shadow" (which, of course, centered on its white lead). ABC's "Lincoln Heights," (2007-2009) stands out as a renewed, multi-year black drama on network TV. The second decade of the 21st century, however, witnessed a vast expansion of black series and dramas in particular. As of the 2017-2018 season, there are at least a dozen majority-black American TV dramas on cable and streaming that have been renewed for at least once: "Queen Sugar," "Greenleaf," "The Haves and Have-nots," (OWN); "Power," (Stars) "Empire," (Fox) "Luke Cage," "Seven Seconds," (Netflix); "Being Mary Jane," "Tales," "The Quad," (BET); "Black Lightning," (CW), "The Chi" (Showtime) and "Underground." (WGN). Unlike earlier majority-black cast dramas, these universally have black creators, executive producers, writers, and directors. In various ways, the echoes of the earlier Black Arts Movement are manifested in these series. Of course, black control and self-determination had been a fundamental component of the Black Arts Movement—as with the broader Black Power Movement. And while these series have all developed outside of the original major three networks (ABC, CBS, NBC), they did not arrive without some precedent of black showrunners. As Angelica Jade Bastién notes in *The Atlantic*, this proliferation of black shows "is built on the success that showrunners like the powerhouses Shonda Rhimes and Mara Brock Akil have worked for in recent years. When *Scandal*'s Olivia Pope sauntered onto television screens in 2012, she was the first black female TV lead in almost 40 years."⁴⁶
- 38 But more importantly, the notion of black self-determination was predicated on the principle that black art would always address, complement and be in dialogic form with the social, political currents of the wider black community. In his most subversive stage, Amiri Baraka went as far as to say that, "the black artist's role in America is the destruction of America as he knows it."⁴⁷ As a virulent critic of racism, militarism and imperialism, the context of Baraka's charge was significantly farther-reaching than the agendas of most members of the current cohort of black creatives in Hollywood. Most of these writers, for example, do not emerge from the political activist or black nationalist tradition that characterized so many of the BAM. Few, for example, give homage to political groups or leaders or tout their militant bona fides. The notion, however, that black artists and their work be substantively tied to the interests of the black community certainly resonates with Baraka's later charge that the "artist's role is to raise the consciousness of the people....Otherwise I don't know why you do it."⁴⁸ Like Sonia Sanchez, Askia Muhammad and dozens of others have noted, art cannot be isolated from the community it represented.⁴⁹ It constantly operates as a reflection of its cultural, social, political tensions, interests, and impulses. This principle is most salient in the degree to which black television shows have grappled with the largest black social justice movement since the Black Power era.
- 39 Fomented by the high-profile killings of unarmed black people and subsequent acquittals of the killers, Black Lives Matter emerged in 2013 when founders, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, initiated #BlackLivesMatter on social media in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who stalked and killed unarmed black teen Trayvon Martin in 2012. Across the country hundreds of small-scale rallies, as well as massive marches with thousands of people have brought BLM into the political arena as no social

movement in decades. Utilizing peaceful actions based on civil disobedience, activists have initiated crowds so large as to stop traffic on major highways, and streets in major cities from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles in ways not witnessed even during the Civil Rights era. Like the poets, singers, literary figures and playwrights of the Black Arts Movement, the creative forces behind the large corpus of black television have engaged the politics of BLM with creative dexterity.

- 40 In the spirit of black artists and intellectuals of the Black Power era, writers and producers of these new black dramas have found their work inextricably tied to the wider social and political currents of the black community. Every show mentioned above has explicitly addressed racial bias in policing. The types of police actions have ranged from menacing police stops, verbal harassment, to corrupt planting of evidence, beatings, and killing. Some have gone as far as to graphically depict police malfeasance and brutality.
- 41 “Queen Sugar,” created, directed and executive produced by Ava DuVernay, with Oprah Winfrey also an executive producer, is one of several dramas that have created storyline arcs across a season addressing Black Lives Matter. Premiering September 6, 2016, the series centers on the three Bordelon siblings: two sisters and a brother in rural Louisiana. One sister, Nova, is a New Orleans-based journalist. The character speaks at rallies, and writes about cases of police terror in the black community, providing the show a space to even recognize and name real victims of lethal police force. The other sister, Charley, a wealthy businesswoman, is horrified when her teenaged son, Micah, falls victim to an abusive police officer who forces his pistol in her son’s mouth, traumatizing the child, and, ultimately, inspiring him to join a BLM high school activist group. The only brother, Ralph-Angel, who works on his sister’s sugar cane farm, had been formerly incarcerated, creating a nod to the carceral state of Louisiana, which infamously imprisons more of its citizens than any other state in a country that incarcerates more of its citizens than any country on earth.⁵⁰
- 42 “Queen Sugar’s” thematic multivalence offers critiques of race, class, gender, and sexuality with sublime nuance. Storylines detail characters who wrestle with issues often explored by social scientists, activists and policy makers, like drug addiction, class conflict, and the carceral state. More than an undifferentiated whole, class and ideological differences play out within the Bordelon family, as when the wealthier Charley bails out and assumes control of the family business—itsself with roots dating to the enslavement of black people in the 19th century. And a prominent white family, with inter-generational wealth and landownership, offers a foil to the Bordelons. Avoiding easy caricatures of southern racism, the white family’s effort to disrupt the black-owned sugar plantation is treated without stock racist vulgarity and clichéd coarseness. Yet, the civility and respect the white family displays for Charley Bordelon appears perfunctory, and even as a deceptively insidious attempt at cooption. In some respects, this relationship operates as a metaphor for the overtures that some white elites have offered black elites as a surreptitious means of minimizing threat and shoring up white hegemonic control. And while the intersection of class and race are explored, the show has remained closely-tied to the current events of police killings of black people. In the first two seasons (with every episode directed by a woman, most of them black), the series addresses BLM, even showing a mural featuring some of the most well-known victims of violence where their killers, mostly police, were all acquitted: Mike Brown, Eric Garner and Trayvon Martin.

- 43 In March 2017, FOX premiered a ten-part limited series, “Shots Fired,” that follows the federal investigation of a shooting of an unarmed white teen by a black police officer. An inversion of the racial profile for most of the high-profile police shootings, the show features a black federal investigator and a black federal police agent. A black officer’s killing of an unarmed white teen prompts a federal investigation, as a premise, challenges the viewer to reconcile the power of law enforcement which operates with virtual impunity when it comes to killings of civilians in the U.S.—regardless of the race of those involved.⁵¹ The show demonstrates, over the span of the season, the complexities of power, class, and race, which are never neatly separated. The black investigators are sensitive to the endemic racial inequalities in the fictional southern town, Gate City— as they carry federally-sanctioned authority. They find themselves confronted with systemic racial discrimination against blacks, even as the black officer benefited from some degree of protections from the wider police department, where he serves as the only officer of color.
- 44 Show creators Gina Prince-Bythewood and Reggie Rock Bythewood have created, written and directed TV series for more than two decades, and in each case adding depth to black characters, while anchoring their experiences in the political and cultural fabric of wider society. In this case, the salience of social justice and the scrutiny of police action is a stark departure from the general narrative of TV crime dramas.
- 45 Crime dramas, universally, depict the police as capable, non-racist, sincere officers of the law and justice, even with personal flaws. Since the 1970s, most have included capable black law enforcement characters, even if they are almost never leads. In “Shots Fired,” unlike nearly every crime drama since the 1950s, the police—and the justice system more broadly—do not appear unfettered by the endemic racism that, in reality, marks the criminal justice system.⁵² As the story unfolds, police malfeasance, cover-ups and gross class inequalities lay bare a world that is not a neat binary of white affluence, black poverty, white power and black impuissance, although these tropes remain convenient shorthand for the political, economic, and social landscape of both the show and the real world. References to private for-profit prisons, compromising politicians, passionate social justice activists and career-driven officers make the drama a rich text for subverting a popular genre without facile attempts at neat conclusions.
- 46 The production of the show was not without some deep emotional investment in the storyline and a strong sense of engagement with the issue of police misconduct, brutality and corruption. In fact, filming of one essential scene (when the young black officer shoots an unarmed white teen) was scheduled the day after a Minnesota officer killed an innocent black motorist, Philando Castile, which happened to be recorded live. Mack Wilds, who portrayed the officer on set, was horrified by the Castile killing. Wilds noted that upon entering his trailer, “the first thing I see is the ... recording. I broke into tears. Like, inconsolable-nobody-could-tell-me-anything tears...I didn’t want to work that day.” The creators, Gina Prince-Bythewood and Reggie Bythewood met with the actor and explained that the show was an important tool to address the very issue that had so disturbed him. “We’re doing this for a reason. It’s more than just trying to make great television,” they noted. “We’re trying to make something. You are one of the voices helping us do it.” Similarly, Aisha Hinds, who plays an activist who protests police brutality, details how emotionally vexing—and important—she found her work. “It was incredibly purposeful,” Hinds stated,

because you felt like you were doing work that was important, necessary ... and relevant. These things were happening so frequently that before you sat and really went through all the emotions of one experience and one encounter and one injustice, another one was behind it. Your emotions were getting muddled to the point where people's emotions were becoming numb. You couldn't keep up with your own grief. People needed to cry out, and this show presents an opportunity to cry out, and continue the conversation.⁵³

- 47 “Shots Fired” was so tied to the coverage of police shootings that one reviewer noted that, at moments, the episodes “feel more like a documentary that chronicles the aftermath — in a small southern American city — of the murder of a black teen as well as a young white man. Law enforcement and media responses are starkly different based on race. Just like in real life.”⁵⁴ The intention to weave popular black political interests into black art had been a foundational concern for the Black Arts Movement. Fifty years later, creative voices, operating with more power and influence than any other era in American popular culture, have found their professional space an important arena for a resistive form of black art that was simultaneously mainstreamed. Price-Bythewood did not equivocate on her and her co-creator’s agenda with their work. “We had an intent — absolutely — to raise consciousness and say something dealing with these shootings. For Reggie and [me] and many others, [this] is the civil rights issue of our day. When you see these shootings happen, it seems like one of the first things the victim loses is their humanity. And when they lose that ...they lose everything.”⁵⁵
- 48 The many direct references and allusions to Black Lives Matter are stark. The fall 2015 premiere of the second season of the most watched black drama, “Empire,” the main characters host a concert which simultaneously operates as a rally against mass incarceration and a protest against the main character’s arrest. The improbably popular main character Cookie announces that the people must resist the incessant harassment and racist treatment from police and courts. The episode opens with a guest appearance from real life hip-hop super producer Swizz Beatz. Beatz informs the concertgoers — as well as the millions of viewers on TV—of the vast numbers of (several hundred thousand) black men who are currently being held in mass incarceration. The season opener was not the only reference to the concerns of the wider black community around police and criminal justice. When police arrest Cookie Lyons in a later episode, she announces to onlookers “If I die in police custody, I did not commit suicide,” an allusion to the death of Sandra Bland who was arrested after being stopped for not using a turn signal in July 2015. Her death in her jail cell was ruled a suicide. It was not the only show to exercise a degree of “edutainment” (a marriage of education and entertainment) regarding imprisonment statistics and black people.
- 49 Season 4, episode 7 of the hit comedy “Black’ish” opens with a quote from Russian novelist and philosopher Fyodor Dostoyevsky, “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” The main character, Dre, then gives a series of sobering numbers of the prison industrial complex, noting that although comprising 13 percent of the U.S., black people are 36 percent of those in prisons and jails, while Akon’s song “Locked Up” plays.
- 50 The finale of the third season of “Being Mary Jane” (December 2015) ends with the main character’s niece being stopped by a hostile police officer who follows a script nearly identical to the Sandra Bland stop. Similarly, “The Quad,” in its second season (2018) features a storyline of the black female president of fictional Georgia A&M University pulled over and arrested by a hostile officer. In the spirit of #SayHerName, a social media

and grassroots effort to keep the name of victims of police harassment and violence who are women and girls, an episode of “Shots Fired” actually, repeats the threat that a Texas State Trooper, Brian Encinia, gave motorist Bland, “I will light you up!”⁵⁶

- 51 Resonating with BAM writers, the executive producer of “Empire,” Sanaa Hamri, explains that, “‘Empire’ is fearless in talking about what is current, what is really happening, whether it’s about bipolar disease in the black community, whether it’s being a gay male in the black community ... So with that said, of course we’re going to tackle issues like black lives matter because it matters to us.”⁵⁷ And while Shonda Rhimes’ “Scandal,” Irv Gotti’s anthology series “Tales,” and Craig Wright’s “Greenleaf” have all created episodes centered on police killings of unarmed black people, the creative power of the new wave of black television is also characterized by its agility to explore black art, beyond the vitiation of black rights and the subversion of justice. The creative contours venture beyond these themes, often providing a fierce celebration of the wider black community, beyond trauma.

8. Black Art and Its Inheritors

- 52 In a wider society where black alterity is normalized, and black writers complain that the wider white staff constructs cardboard black characters with very little substance, these black shows have made vast intertextual allusions to black creative predecessors of various platforms. Across shows, many episodes have been homages to the literary canon of black writers, musicians, intellectuals, and political leaders. The episode, “I Get Physical,” (Season 2, episode 4) of “Luke Cage,” alone, references former Congresswoman and U.S. presidential candidate Shirley Chisholm, early aviator Bessie Coleman, heavy weight champion Joe Louis, hip-hop artists Mobb Deep and D-Nice, corporate leaders Reginald Lewis, Earl Graves, anti-lynching activist and suffragist Ida B. Wells, and musical superstar Beyoncé. Passing references to these figures are made organically in a way that demands viewer familiarity with the names, while simultaneously not disrupting the story arch. These allusions operate as important components to enrich and add verisimilitude to the depictions black communities. They are also resistive gestures to Hollywood’s historic tendencies to evade black complexity, history, and agency.
- 53 Like the Black Arts Movement, these shows, largely created, written and directed by African Americans, have forged a salient line of inheritance from cultural antecedents of black art. Unlike the BAM artists who often viewed their work as bolder, *blacker*, and more defiant than the work of those whom they succeeded, there is a copious amount of references to black artists in these shows, evincing a continuity, rather than a break in creative expression. “The Quad” has done this with aplomb, referencing titles of literary classics as episode titles from Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Maya Angelou’s *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* to Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and James Baldwin’s *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. Often tied directly to the theme of the episode, the writers do not give short shrift to hip-hop, actually playing Kendrick Lamar’s informal anthem of BLM, “Alright,” during a protest scene and episode titles derived from hip-hop songs, like Tupac’s “Holla if Ya Hear Me.” Note that just as the BAM was not solely occupied with assailing against racism, these shows have offered a conspicuous celebrations of black arts— across mediums.
- 54 Hip-hop songs as titles for episodes has been a prominent device among these shows, most of which have been created by those of the Hip-Hop Generation.⁵⁸ The titles of all

episodes of “Luke Cage” come from hip-hop groups Gang Starr (season one) and Pete Rock & CL Smooth (season two) song titles.⁵⁹ In addition to “The Quad,” the “Black’ish” spinoff, “Grown’ish,” which centers on the college life of eldest child of the Johnson family, has episodes named after hip-hop classics, like Kanye West’s “Late Registration,” Wu-Tang Clan’s “C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me),” and newer hits like The Weeknd’s “Starboy,” and Drake’s “If You’re Reading This, It’s Too Late.”

Conclusion

- 55 The expansion of black creative control in television is remarkable in many ways. The access to power from executive positions as showrunners, through executive producers, directors and writers is not without significance. Black directors, such as veterans like Neema Barnette, and Mario Van Peebles, through Oz Scott, Regina King, Salim Akil, Kasi Lemmons, Salli Richardson-Whitfield, Seith Mann, Millicent Sheldon, and many others have been afforded professional space to engage their craft. In realizing their talents, they have achieved notoriety, awards, honors and acclaim. This had occurred while bridging chasms across black creative space, politics and culture. Showrunners from Ava DuVernay, Lee Daniels, Courtney Kemp, Shonda Rhimes, and Cheo Hodari Coker have unprecedented access to influence and power, even as they universally offer art that complements wider social justice activism, politics and critical critiques from the margins of society. And like the BAM, they reflect a gender balance that far exceeds that of the white mainstream. Black women are central—if not dominant—in this movement. They have created black female characters in virtually every show from university presidents to powerful Washington insiders who influence the geo-political landscape, that defy constricted representations generally found in white-scripted shows. The power of the self-determinative spirit resoundingly manifests itself in these shows.
- 56 The core thrust of the explosion of black shows must be understood as a convergence of a wide range of forces, including pressure from black creative communities, new technologies and platforms for viewing shows, and Hollywood studios responding to demographic shifts in its market and the allure of profit making. In fact, one report found that “broadcast network TV advertising expenditure “focused on black audiences (defined as ad dollars placed on programming with greater than 50% black viewers) ... increased by 255%” between 2011-2015.⁶⁰ But more than just access to influence in television, the black creative class in television has been careful to provide a critical view of the social and political tensions in black communities and the country more broadly. They have, most importantly, upended and challenged conventional narratives of police and the criminal justice system, giving a critical voice and visibility to black political concerns. There is little question that this is an apogee of black creativity and exposure in the arts. No moment in history has witnessed a greater visibility of black people, their lives, beauties, flaws, strengths and weaknesses. And essential to this movement are the salient allusions to the creative antecedents who struggled, pushed and forged art that, while invisible to most white Americans, had always given depth, and humanity to the black community. The early 21st century finds these articulations and creative works consumed by millions of Americans across racial and ethnic lines. These shows—unlike much of the work of the BAM—are consumed by non-African American audiences, although racialized viewing patterns remain solidly in practice. All-white, or mostly-white casts have a significantly higher percentage of viewers who are whites. Similarly,

majority-black cast shows have higher percentages of black viewers.⁶¹ Despite divergent TV viewing habits, non-blacks have been central to the success of many black shows. The reach, therefore, of this art is exponentially more far-reaching than the bulk of work from the BAM-era artists. Whether this translates into the power, political, and social impact that artists may want is another matter.

- 57 Even as the degree of access and influence remains limited, and the exigencies of racism remain, the rise of a this black creative class in Hollywood, its assiduous efforts to maintain black self-determinative work, give homages to black art, and celebrate the fullness of black humanity are core elements to the creative agenda that overlaps perfectly with the ambitions of the Black Arts Movement. Though not necessarily revolutionary in their artistic expressions, the BAM, itself, was never monolithic. Some art addressed sexism within the black community, while others glorified love, the joys of dance, song and family. Its artists understood the multi-dimensionality of black people. It also understood the utility of art in protest and social justice. In space where black humanity and complexity are systematically absent, the assertion of the fullness black humanity is a resistive act. This is especially acute with social justice struggles. As Larry Neal explained in 1969, BAM was the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.”⁶² In some ways, many black artists have utilized their roles in television to become the artistic wing of the social justice struggles of their day.

58 **Proper names:**

Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, James Baldwin, Mara Brock-Akil, Sanaa Hami, Malcolm X, Ishmael Reed, Chinua Achebe, Michael Moye, Ava DuVernay, Shonda Rhimes, Gina Prince-Bythewood, Reggie Rock Bythewood, Sandra Bland, Salim Akil, Cheo Hodari Coker, Lee Daniels.

NOTES

1. “Revolution Song,” *The Guardian*, 3 August 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/aug/04/featuresreviews.guardianreview12>, accessed 6 August 2018.
2. Historians have come to call the modern, roughly 20-year struggle for black freedom in the United States the Black Freedom Movement. It captures the ideological diversity of two separate, but related movements: civil rights and black power. See Hasan Jeffries, “Black Freedom Movement,” in *Keywords for African American Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 22-24, eds. Erica R. Edwards, Roderick A. Ferguson, Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar.
3. Quoted in Reiland Rabaka, *Hip Hop’s Inheritance: From the Harlem Renaissance to Hip Hop Feminist Movement* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 105.
4. Donald Bogle, *Heat Wave: The Life and Career of Ethel Waters* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2011); Elizabeth McLeod, *The Original Amos 'n' Andy: Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll and the 1928-1943 Radio Serial* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005).
5. E.U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: The Search for an Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 154; Malcolm X, “Message to the Grassroots,” in *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Brietman (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 6-8.

6. Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, "Black Power: The Looks," in *Black Power 50*, edited by Sylviane Anna Diouf and Komozi Woodard (New York: The New Press, 2016), 126.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Inheritance*, 99. (Emphasis in original).
9. For more on the Black Power Movement, see Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); John H. Bracy, Jr. Sonia Sanchez, James Smethurst, editors, *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014); Peniel E. Joseph, ed. *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, (New York: Routledge, 2006).
10. Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), xii; Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Inheritance*, 96-100, 111; Jerry Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), *passim*.
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ABSTRACTS

Beginning in the late 1960s, the Black Arts Movement grew as the cultural wing of the Black Power Movement. It was represented by a rich cross section of artistic work, often forged by young urban artists in genres as diverse as music, dance, visual arts, literature and theatre. No aesthetic was unaffected by inflections of this new black consciousness. This article explores the ways in which, a half-century after the Black Arts Movement, African Americans in television have cultivated an aesthetic and politics that resonate with the core thrust of the Black Arts Movement, one that sets black people in the center of their own cultural and political narratives, and inextricably bound to the wider movements of social justice in black communities.

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