Cultural Diversity in American Media History

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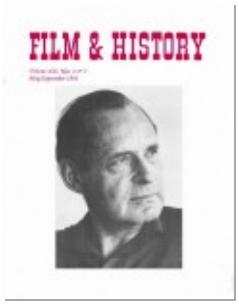

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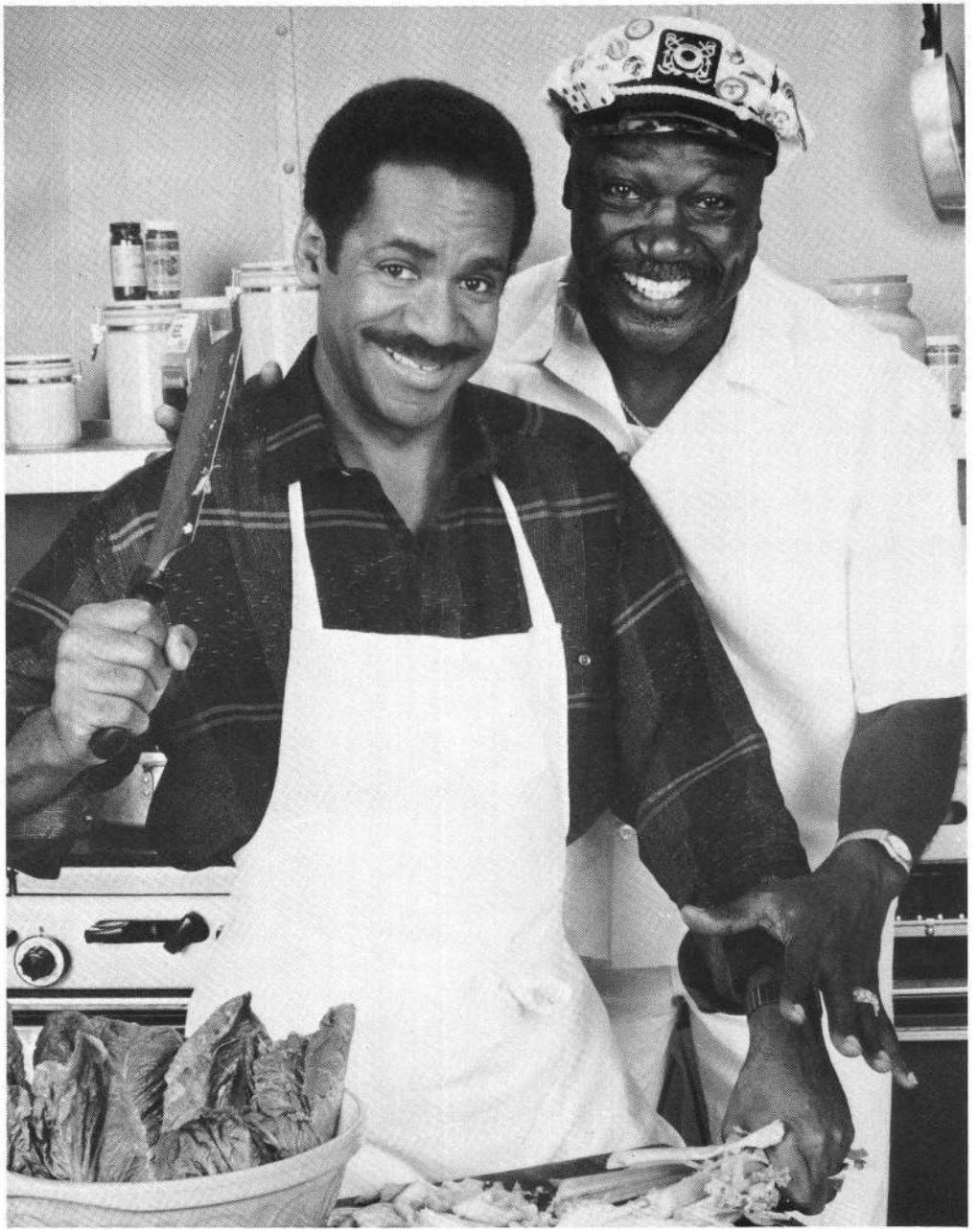

Tim Reid and Tony Burton in Frank's Place *(CBS). Although critically acclaimed for its representation of African Americans in an urban community, CBS canceled the series after one season--14 September 1987 to 17 March 1988.*

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Unlike many other textbooks of the period, the books written by Erik Barnouw that became classic references for communications scholars included information about African American participation in the media. Examples that come to mind include his discussions in *Tube of Plenty*[1] of the works of African Americans such as Sidney Poitier in "Philco TV Playhouse," Cicely Tyson in "East Side, West Side," and the short-lived "Nat 'King' Cole Show" of 1956. I became aware of his pattern of including people of color, while others excluded such references, as I taught courses in the Department of Radio, Television and Film in the School of Communications at Howard University.

Because many other textbooks did not include African American participants in histories of media industries, I located such information for my courses, and began to weave threads of black media history into my lectures. When my colleagues and I realized that many of us were adding similar information to the base of knowledge for our students, we began to envision ways of more effectively addressing this issue and disseminating information. *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* is the result of that effort.[2]

Split Image is a historical, comparative analysis that develops the theme of "a war of images" as a mechanism to help encourage understanding of how and why the mass media evolved as they did with respect to African American citizens. We argue that majority rule unconsciously carries with it the threat of domination and therefore the tendency for people to endorse the status quo. In America, white domination gave rise to African American cultural resistance, splitting the black image. In this regard, on the one hand there were the numerous white developed images of black people, while on the other hand there were the self-developed images that some African Americans managed to maneuver past the white male gatekeepers, who consistently attempted to block images that were not a part of their own experience.

Split Image is designed to help African Americans in reclaiming their historical identity and to encourage all image makers to develop and show respect for the multiracial, multicultural society that will characterize 21st Century America. Educators are on the cutting edge of helping future generations in the development of this respect across racial and cultural divides. Our book may assist in that process. It teaches African Americans to understand their place in history, especially media history,

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and to understand their racial predecessors in media industries. It also helps white youngsters understand why and how media have evolved as they have towards African Americans, as it assists in the realization that the perceptions history books have generated about contributors to the growth and development of America need to be reviewed. Textbooks, such as this one, may help students better understand the issue surrounding the increasing concern about the development of multiculturally focused studies.

We argue that African American responses to white domination included accommodation, resistance and combinations of the two responses, sometimes used in the development of alternatives. White exploitation of African American cultural products included the expropriation of new creations by African Americans, which were diluted and trivialized for mass consumption.

The intellectual focus of *Split Image* was developed from the works of W.E.B. Du Bois who discussed the cultural legacy of the problem of the color line, which he prophesied would be the problem to dominate the planet for one hundred years. Du Bois talked about the peculiar sensation in which the African Americans always lives, of "seeing oneself through the eyes of others," and "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." "One ever feels his twoness, Du Bois said, "an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings." He believed the history of the black man is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self, without losing identity either as an American or as a person of African heritage.[3]

We used Sterling A. Brown's extensive comments on the bifurcation of black images in American culture. He pointed out the differences in fictional representations of blacks by white authors and by black authors. He identified the recurring caricatures developed by white authors, thus unmasking the stereotypes put forth by the dominant culture.[4]

The theoretical framework was developed from cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall, a Jamaican who is currently a Professor of Sociology at the Open University in Britain, and from Antonio Gramsci's concept of ideological hegemony. Hall argues that the dominant culture secures subordination by weakening, destroying, displacing or incorporating alternative institutions of defense and resistance thrown up by the subordinate class. Stuart Hall states that one can deconstruct language and behavior to decipher patterns of ideological thinking embedded or inscribed. We used Hall's theoretical constructs to analyze the scrutinized media. Gramsci argues that ruling class alliances maintain power by cultivating a consensus among subordinate classes - ensuring the triumph of what is thought of as common sense among all sectors of the social order. Cultural domination provokes its opposite, cultural resistance, in subordinate classes. Thus, ideological hegemony is an unstable equilibrium: a constant tug of war between the opposing forces of cultural domination and cultural resistance.[5]

In the 1970s, James Baldwin, the African American expatriate to France, renowned literary scholar, and chronicler of the African American experience, observed in a television interview to white Americans his thoughts on why America was so resistant to

the fair treatment of black Americans. He said, "If I'm not who you say I am, then you're not who you think you are."[6] Baldwin's clear thinking on issues of race were demonstrated again in this profound statement.

We believe it is important for students to understand how persons of various racial groups contribute to society. When the history of broadcasting is taught, therefore, and Bing Crosby is cited as a very talented man who used his talent and skills to build enterprises that amassed a fortune for himself and his heirs, students cal also learn about the "Queen of the Blues," Bessie Smith. She was one of the artists whose works were recorded by Columbia Records in the 1920s under the category "race records." At this time, Columbia was on the verge of filing for bankruptcy, as it faced stiff competition from the radio industry. Somewhat desperate, Columbia Records tried something new--race records marketed to white audiences. Smith's nearly 200 songs were so popular with this market that she literally saved Columbia from certain bankruptcy. As you probably have guessed, Smith never received a dime in royalties from Columbia Records--she received a flat amount of money per recording session that in no way reflected even a fraction of her value to the company. Columbia Records went on to become a multi-national corporation, while Smith died tragically and impoverished and was buried in Philadelphia without even a marker for her grave. Janis Joplin, a famous white, pop artist of the 1970s who used much of Bessie Smith's music in her own work, persuaded the company to help her place a marker on the grave.[7]

Not only did Columbia Records make money from Smith's music while she lived, but through the years it has re-released her works each time a new format emerged: there are Bessie Smith works in 78s, 45s, 33s, 8-track tapes, tape cassettes, and now digital CDs.[8] The profits, in each instance, of course accrue to the stockholders at Columbia Records, now Sony Music of Japan, with none to Bessie Smith's heirs.

Many of today's educators may recall that Pat Boone, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and numerous others used black music to their advantage while African American originators of the music suffered in obscurity and poverty. A recent example of this phenomenon includes the work of Michael Bolton, who has amassed tremendous recognition and vast rewards for "When a Man Loves a Woman," with little originality of his own. This song originated as a 1960s recording by Percy Sledge, a black singer.

As students learn about the commercial television industry, they can read about and watch the tapes from the endeavors of pioneering African Americans, including Bill Cosby, not just for Cosby's work on camera, but for his many courageous actions that have helped people from numerous marginalized groups gain a foothold in media industries. They should study the works of innovators such as Tim Reid, who working with Hugh Wilson, a white producer, wanted to use authentic folklore, story ideas, and important message to attract audiences to "Frank's Place." This series, a sterling example of African American resistance to the dominant culture's image of black people, developed storylines that were grounded in an African American-focused worldview with a steadfast respect for the culture being portrayed.

Executive Producers Hugh Wilson and Tim Reid used aural as well as visual cues to carry the narrative. For example, the episode 'What's Goin On?' used Marvin Gaye's recording by the same name to focus viewers' attention on the youth of some drug dealers and the toll such illegal enterprises take on young people. The episode showed strong older black men and women who refused to allow the young man who was yielding to temptation to fall into the trap, without intervention by responsible adults. They counseled him, preached to him, acted as role models and set standards for him. Thus, when he could, he was able to wrench himself free of the tentacles of the drug life and return to the safe haven offered by the people found in "Frank's Place."

In 1987, the dominant culture would not allow this black image maker to continue to develop programming that showed respect for a different culture. Instead, decision makers denied Reid and Wilson access to audiences which may have chosen to visit "Frank's Place" weekly as they did "Cheers" for more than 200 episodes. With equal treatment for these two series, this writer believes "Frank's Place," with its short life of 22 episodes would have been a close competitor to "Cheers."

Split Image argues that there is a need for decision makers from the many different groups that make up society to have responsibilities in all types of jobs at all levels. If, for example, there had been decision makers from groups other than the mainstream there is a greater possibility that "Frank's Place" may have been given the type of nurturance given to shows such as "Cheers," and more recently, "Northern Exposure."

Scholars Gramsci and Hall would argue that supremacist ideology made white decision makers refuse to allow this series to have the nurturance given other series precisely because it was good.

To help make more textbooks available that document the stories of African American participation in media industries, this year at the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center I am working on research that addresses this issue. My research indicates that in recent years although African Americans have made some inroads into American media organizations, their efforts to break into the media's board rooms have been less successful. This lack of black representation leaves a legacy of media misrepresentation of the black experience. My study will focus on the small number of African American leaders found at various levels in five mainstream mass media industries: commercial television, public television, advertising, public relations and motion pictures. I plan to examine the effect of that leadership on black images and experiences in media and media organizations; to analyze the creations that have emerged in media from African American experiences; and to give voice to the cultural vitality found in the midst of poverty, neglect and decay, as well as in the black middle class.

I will also describe and examine the enormous influence of African American creativity on the mass media. African Americans had and continue to have a profound effect on mass media, far out of proportion to their number in American society. This imprimatur occurred despite the barriers erected to keep them out of the decision-making process, despite the small percentage of African Americans in society, and despite the

industry's failure to confer recognition, respect, and rewards on many of the creative geniuses who come from the African American community.

One need not look far for evidence of the underlying African American creative influence on media. It can be seen in the proliferation of television programming, films, advertising, and public relations campaigns that use African American based music and fashion ideas; in sports events, which are dominated by African American superstars that rule weekly television sports programming; and in national and international music and recording industries that are replete with black musical codes and conventions.

The media are the "myth-makers," because they tell us who we are, how society functions, and where people fit in the world. And while some programming, such as the Fox network's "Roc," show black people as complex, multi-dimensional beings, the dominant media culture ignores and fails to promote blacks' perspectives about their own experiences, choosing instead to portray the myths of African American life as filled with clown-type characters or with crime, decadence and despair.

It is the responsibility of educators to help shape the worldviews of our students in their formative years so that they will become less accepting of stereotypical characterizations. I urge all of us to take this responsibility seriously, for I submit to you that we share one country. We all must learn to tolerate our differences, recognize our similarities, and thus embrace our humanity, as we assist in saving our country from a disaster course of monumental proportions.

NOTES

[1]Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (rev. ed). (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[2]Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow, *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990).

[3]W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett, 1961), 16-17.

[4]Sterling A. Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama* (2nd ed). (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

[5]Stuart Hall, "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2,2, June 1985, 91-113.

[6]James Baldwin, interviewed on CBS News, October 1967.

[7]See, for example, Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972).

[8]David Hatchett, "Q & A: The Crisis Interview--Dr. George Butler," *Crisis*, August/September 1990, Vol. 97, No. 7. pg. 15.