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PRIME TIME IN BLACK AND WHITE: NOT MUCH IS NEW FOR 2002

The Study

Prime Time in Black and White is a five-year, longitudinal study of diversity on prime time network television. The goal of the project is to explore the relationships between television entertainment and today's American racial order. Last year's study, *Prime Time in Black and White: Making Sense of the 2001 Fall Season*, is available online at the Bunche Center web site.¹ It provides a more detailed discussion of the socio-political implications of prime time programming and serves as a benchmark against which the findings presented in this report are considered.

This year's study examined 234 episodes of 85 sitcoms and dramas airing on ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN, and WB during three weeks between October 13 and November 16, 2002.² The resulting sample consisted of 189.5 hours of programming and included coding for 3656 characters.

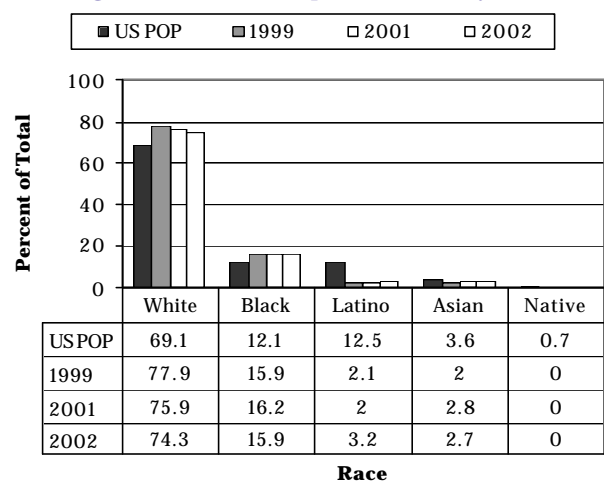
The 2002 Findings

Prime time television continues to present a largely black and white world

Despite the ever-increasing diversity of American society, prime time continues to depict a largely black and white world. Findings from the second

year of the study revealed that both black and white Americans are over-represented in prime time, with whites accounting for about 74 percent of all characters, compared to only about 69 percent of the U.S. population. Blacks accounted for about 16 percent of all characters compared to about 12 percent of the population (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Prime Time Representation by Year



The television figures for blacks have held steady since at least 1999 (when the Screen Actors Guild released a study on race in prime time), while those for whites have decreased slightly from about 78

¹ Please visit www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu to download the full benchmark study. It can be accessed on the "Research" page, "Bunche Research Report" section.

² These weeks were selected to correspond to the weeks selected in the benchmark study, which coincide with the initial airings of new fall programming and include two important programming environments in the sample (sweeps versus non-sweeps). Nine trained researchers viewed tapes of the programming and coded the data in accordance with a standard codebook. An agreement level of greater than 90 percent was achieved in a training test, as well as in a 10-percent post-test sampling. Certain variables were dropped from the analysis and others were recoded in order to subsequently increase the effective level of inter-coder reliability.

percent in 1999.³ Combined, whites and blacks constituted 90 percent of all prime-time characters in 2002, a number not significantly different from the 92-percent figure observed in the first year of the study.

Latinos are the most underrepresented group in prime time

Latinos accounted for only about 3 percent of all characters in prime time, compared to nearly 13 percent of the U.S. population. This more than four-to-one representation gap seems particularly anomalous given recent public discussions about the emergence of Latinos as the nation's largest minority group.

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Some observers have accounted for this representation gap by pointing to the presence of Spanish-language media in the U.S., which they argue may better serve the needs of Latino audience members and the advertisers who are attempting to reach them. In other words, some argue that prime-time network television under-represents Latinos because it is less profitable to target them as viewers (i.e., to cast shows with Latino characters) than it is to target whites or blacks. While this logic is rooted in findings suggesting that viewers tend to prefer programs populated with characters resembling them, it is silent on the possible social and political implications of Latino under-representation in prime time.

Another explanation for the gap holds that the white-male-dominated industry has a hard time imagining Latino characters as anything other than maids and gardeners, which severely restricts narrative (and casting) opportunities for Latinos in prime time. (We explore this explanation below, when character occupations are examined).

Asian Americans may be approaching proportionate representation in prime time

Asian Americans accounted for about 3 percent of all characters in prime time, compared to nearly 4 percent of the U.S. population. In this sense, Asian Americans, unlike Latinos, appear to be closing the gap between their on-screen presence and their actual presence in the nation's population.

On the other hand, relatively few of these Asian American characters are "series regulars," the central characters around whom a prime-time

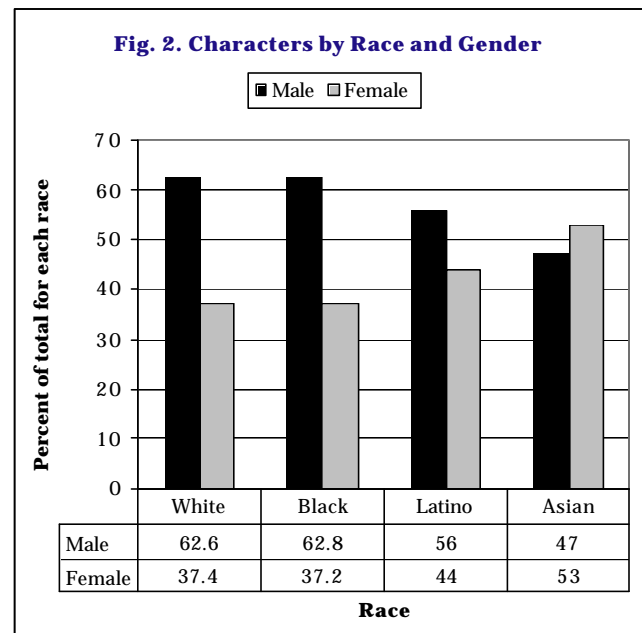
program revolves and with whom audience members identify. Indeed, not a single prime-time, network series in 2002 featured an Asian American as *the* central character. The other groups (with the exception of Native Americans) had at least one series in which a member of the group was featured as the primary character.

Native Americans are completely invisible in prime time

No Native American character could be identified out of the 3656 characters coded in the 2002 study. This finding was consistent with findings from the first year of the study, as well as a 1999 study of minority representation in prime time.⁴

Prime time continues to present a male-dominated world

Figure 2 presents a gender breakdown of characters by race. For both whites and blacks, nearly 63 percent of all characters are male. For Latinos, the figure is 56 percent, while females outnumber males only among Asian Americans (about 53 percent to 47 percent).



While the occupations of characters in prime time vary by race, there is no consistent pattern in how character status is portrayed across racial groups

Among high status occupations like "doctor" and "lawyer" (see fig. 3 and fig. 4), white and black

³ See *The African American Television Report*, Screen Actors Guild, June 2000.

⁴ Ibid.

Americans were portrayed similarly in prime time. That is, white characters were slightly more likely than black ones to be portrayed as doctors (4.9 percent to 4.1 percent), while black characters were slightly more likely than white ones to be portrayed as lawyers (3.6 percent to 2.6 percent). While there were no clearly identified Asian American lawyers in the sampled programming, Asian American characters were more likely than those from any other group to be portrayed as doctors (5 percent). Latino characters were the least represented among these high status occupations, with just 1.3 percent of the characters portrayed as doctors and none clearly portrayed as lawyers. This latter finding may lend some credence to the argument discussed above that the white males who dominate industry decision-making tend to imagine Latino characters primarily in low-status occupations.

Figures 5 and 6 present a racial comparison of characters portrayed as “police officers” and “criminals,” respectively. Police officer was one of the most popularly portrayed occupations across the groups, with the exception of Asian American characters who—despite the Model Minority stereotype—were more likely to be portrayed as criminals than characters from any other group (11.7 percent). Meanwhile, black characters were more likely to be portrayed as police officers than characters from any other group (11.8 percent), followed by Latino characters (10.1 percent), white characters (6.8 percent) and Asian American characters (1.7 percent). Black characters were slightly more likely than white or Latino characters to be portrayed as criminals (2.9 percent, compared to 2.0 percent and 1.3 percent, respectively).

Fig. 3. Percent of all characters who are doctors, by race

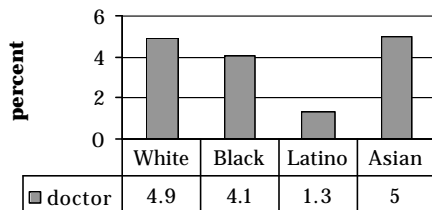


Fig. 4. Percent of all characters who are lawyers, by race

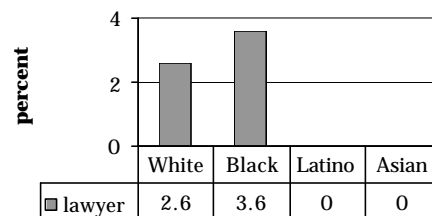


Fig. 5. Percent of all characters who are police officers, by race

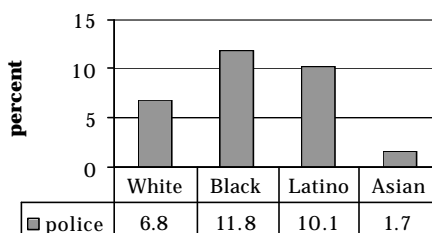


Fig. 6. Percent of all characters who are criminals, by race

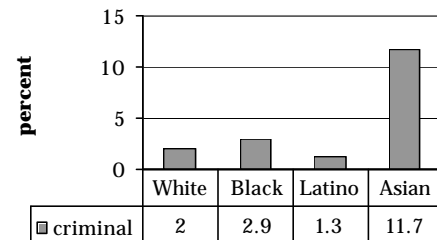


Fig. 7. Percent of all characters who are students, by race

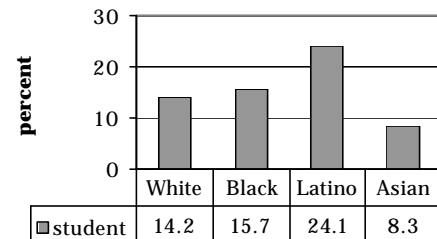
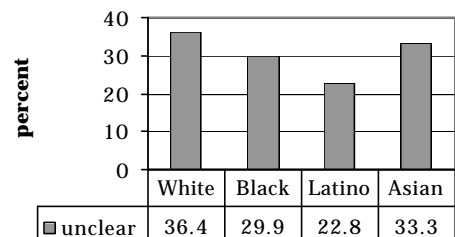


Fig. 8. Percent of all characters whose occupation is unclear, by race



“Student” was another popularly portrayed occupation in prime time (see fig. 7). Latino characters were more likely than characters from any other group to be portrayed as students (24.1 percent), followed by black characters (15.7 percent), white characters (14.2 percent) and Asian American characters (8.3 percent). It should be noted, however, that the popularity of this occupational portrayal can be largely attributed to a coding rule that identified all children of school age as “students.”

The largest occupational category across the groups was “unclear” (see fig. 8). That is, consistent with narrative conventions in prime time, the occupations of characters were often not discussed or even identified in a given episode.⁵

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White characters dominate “screen time”

For the first time, the study of the 2002 season examined the total amount of *time* white, black, Latino and Asian American characters appeared on the screen in their respective shows (see fig. 9). The data revealed that white characters continued to dominate prime time not only in terms of the number of characters, but also in terms of the *prominence* of the characters in their respective shows’ narratives. That is, white characters accounted for 224.4 hours of screen time—about 81 percent of the total screen time of 275.8 hours for characters of all groups. Black characters accounted for 40.5 hours of screen time, or about

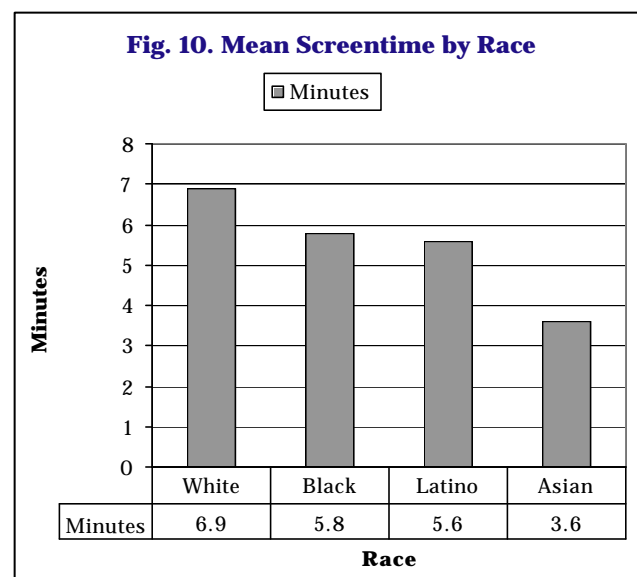
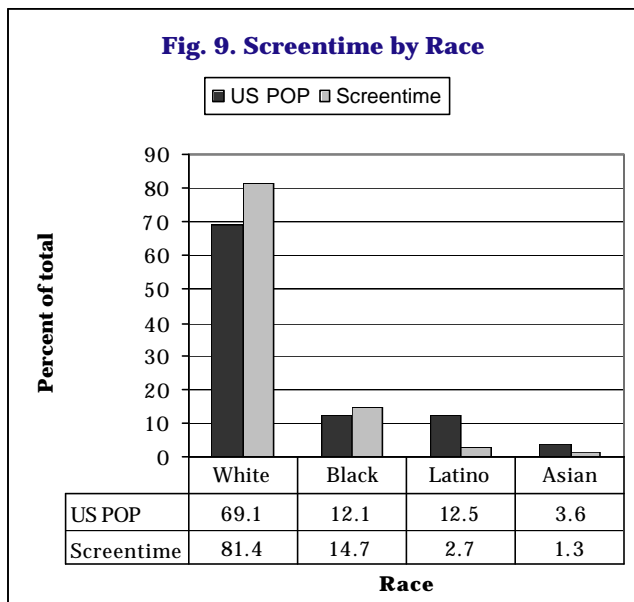
15 percent of the total.

Meanwhile, Latino and Asian American characters accounted only for 7.4 hours and 3.6 hours of screen time, respectively. In other words, both Latino and Asian Americans were significantly underrepresented in terms of screen time, accounting for only about 3 percent and 1 percent of total screen time, respectively. *Mean* character screen times by group were as follows: white characters, 6.9 minutes; black characters, 5.8 minutes; Latino characters, 5.6 minutes; and Asian American characters, 3.6 minutes (see fig. 10).

Racial representation continues to vary by network

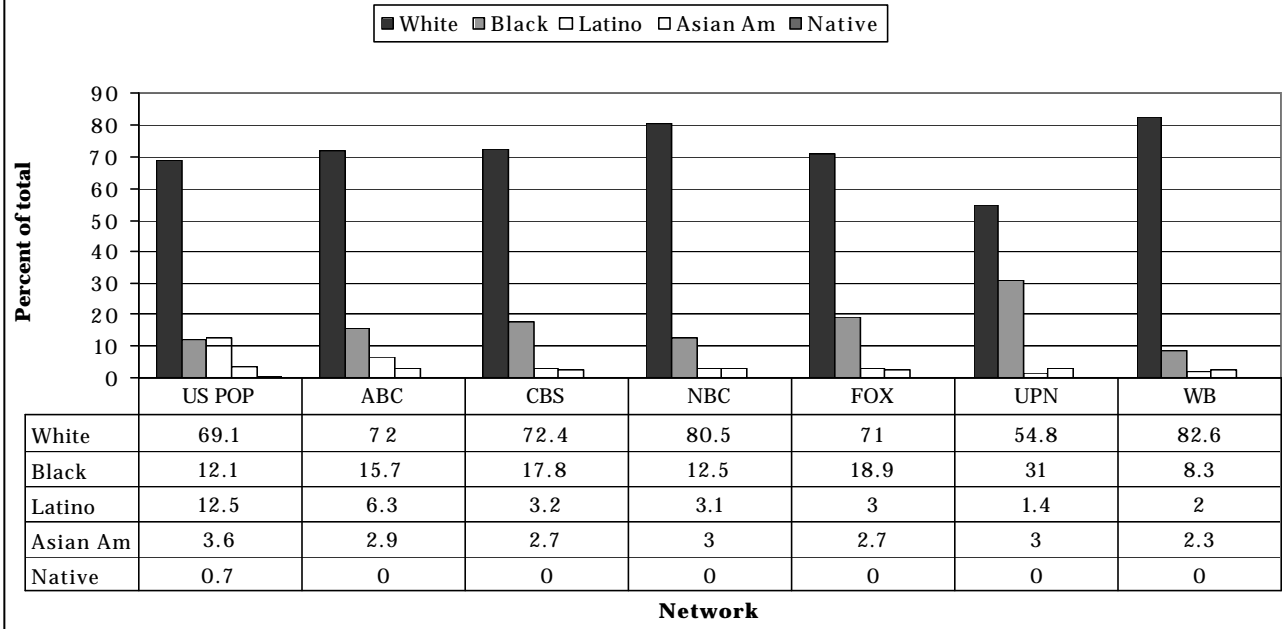
Previous studies of race in prime time suggest that black and white characters have been largely segregated by network and night of the week. Findings from the 2002 season reveal that white Americans are most over-represented on the WB and NBC, where they account for about 83 percent and 81 percent of all characters, respectively (compared to only about 69 percent of the U.S. population). Blacks, in contrast, continue to be most over-represented on UPN, where they account for 31 percent of all characters, despite making up only about 12 percent of the U.S. population (see fig. 11).

Other minority characters appear so infrequently in prime time that the patterns were not as pronounced as the ones for blacks and whites.



⁵ The popularity of this occupational portrayal (or lack thereof) can also largely be attributed to a coding rule—one that demanded explicit reference to or signs of a given occupation *in the specific episode* in order to warrant coding for the occupation.

Fig. 11. Racial Representation by Network



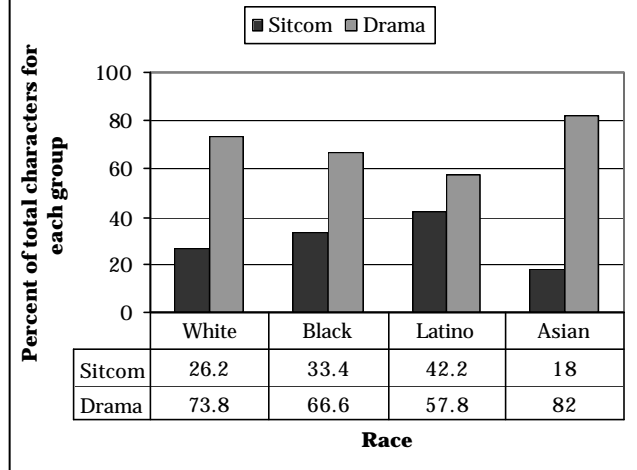
African American characters are no longer concentrated in situation comedies

Earlier studies of prime time have criticized the absence of African American television dramas and noted that blacks characters were more likely to be concentrated in situation comedies than characters from any other racial group. In the past, this finding raised concerns that prime time might be primarily portraying African Americans as buffoonish characters ill-equipped for meaningful contribution to the larger society.⁶

Figure 12 shows that for the 2002 season this pattern was not evident. While it is likely that the most prominent black characters continue to be concentrated in situation comedies (e.g., those from UPN’s Monday night lineup, see below), black characters in general were twice as likely to appear in television dramas (66.6 percent versus 33.4 percent). The numbers for white characters were similar—73.8 percent in dramas, compared to just 26.2 percent in situation comedies.

A higher percentage of Latino characters appeared in situation comedies than of characters from any other group (42.2 percent). In contrast, Asian Americans had the smallest representation in situation comedies (18 percent).

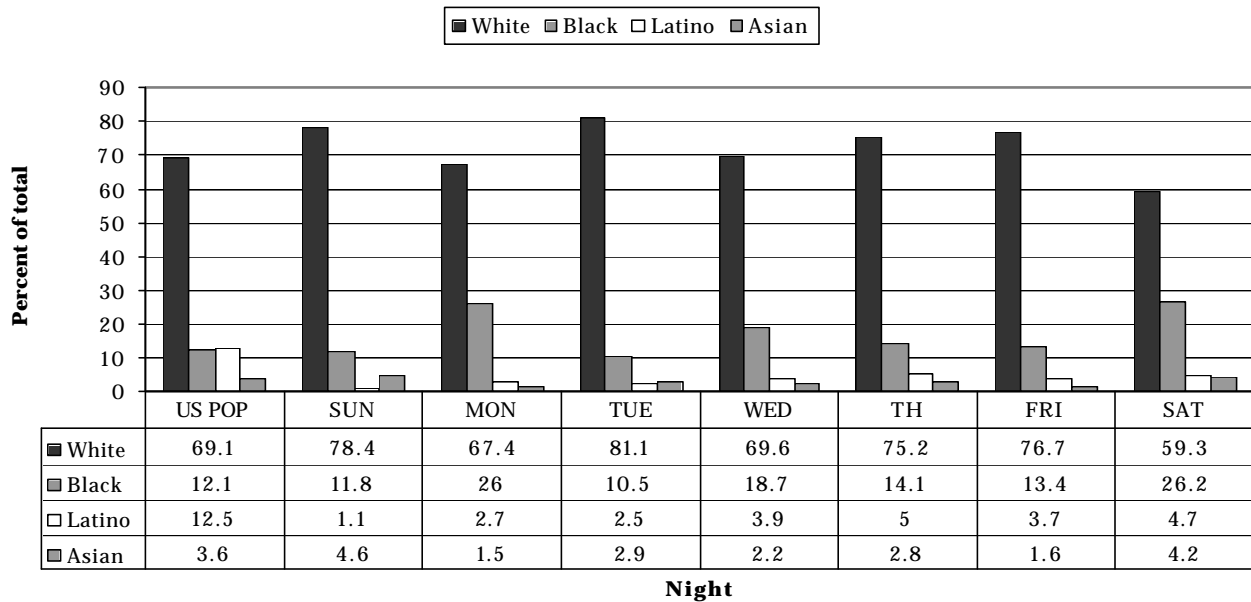
Fig. 12. Show Type by Race of Character



UPN’s Monday line-up still constitutes “black night” in prime time

While not as pronounced as in previous years, UPN’s Monday night situation comedies continue to account for a disproportionate share of prominent black characters (see fig. 13). That is, 112 of the 125 black characters appearing on Monday night did so on UPN (90 percent). Although these 112 characters represent only about 19 percent of all black characters in prime time (n=580), they accounted for nearly 30 percent of total black

⁶ See *The African American Television Report*.

Fig. 13. Racial Representation by Night

screen time (about 12.2 hours out of a total of 40.5 hours). Moreover, four of the five shows with the highest percentage of characters who are black—*The Parkers* (76.7 percent), *Half and Half* (76.0 percent), *Girlfriends* (70.4 percent), and *One on One* (65.6 percent)—constitute the network’s Monday night line-up. The fifth show, *My Wife and Kids* (72.4 percent) is a black-oriented sitcom that appears on ABC.

Saturday—the least-watched night for prime time television—was another prominent night for African American characters, where they accounted for more than 26 percent of all characters. The four series airing that evening all featured casts in which black Americans were over-represented. Three of the series aired on CBS—*The District* (50 percent), *Touched By An Angel* (18 percent), and *The Agency* (15 percent)—while the remaining series, *Law & Order* (20.2 percent), aired on NBC. Fox, UPN, and WB did not air original series on Saturday evenings.

Conclusions

The findings from 2002 are mixed. Amidst firm white control of the industry,⁷ prime time continues to present a largely black and white world. The industry continues to be driven by business logics that divide the nation into market segments based on race, where the large but declining white segment reigns supreme.

Programs designed to reach the other, smaller racial niches are relegated to a night or two, and often concentrated on the smaller networks, if at all. Integrated programming featuring characters of different races that interact with one another—and that share equitable degrees of prominence—is the exception rather than the rule.

While the picture painted in prime time arguably reflects the hierarchical reality of American race relations with startling clarity, it also may work to reinforce that reality by splintering the diverse cultural forum that might otherwise re-imagine it.

⁷ For example, a Director’s Guild of America (DGA) study released in July 2003 shows that white males directed more than 80 percent of television episodes from the top-40 shows for 2002, despite accounting for less than 34 percent of the U.S. population. Black Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans combined—more than 30 percent of the U.S. population—directed only about 7 percent of the episodes. These figures were virtually unchanged from those for the previous year. See the first installment of *Prime Time and Black and White: Making Sense of the 2001 Fall Season* for a more detailed discussion of the earlier DGA study, as well as recent findings documenting white control of the television writing and producing ranks.

⁸ For example, see Jhally, Sut and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992, for a discussion of how “positive” images of minorities on television may unintentionally work to support conservative political agendas.

On the other hand, prime time—as reflected in character occupations—depicts an American landscape where minorities are more prevalent in high-status occupations than they are in the real world. While these images may provide minorities with high status role models, they also may constitute a representational double-edged sword that presents American society as more open than it really is.⁸

The final three installments of *Prime Time in Black and White* will address these issues more fully as they continue to track diversity—and the lack thereof—in prime time representations.

Acknowledgments

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About the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies

Established in 1969 as an organized research unit (ORU) of the University of California, Los Angeles, the Bunche Center is one of the oldest centers in the nation devoted to the study of African American life, history, and culture. For more information, please visit www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu.

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