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IT'S *A DIFFERENT WORLD* THAN WHERE *THE PARKERS* COME FROM: A  
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION BLACK CAST  
SITCOMS FROM ORIGINAL BROADCAST TO STREAMING

by

Allyson Felecia Smith

Under the Direction of Jade Petermon, PhD

ABSTRACT

From 1987 to 1993 on NBC, *A Different World* focused on African American students navigating their experience at an elite Historically Black College and University (HBCU). From 1999 until 2004, *The Parkers* on UPN focused on a mother and daughter navigating their experience at a Community College. *The Parkers* and *A Different World* are similar television shows whose reception is impacted by how each series is indexed to their original production culture, syndication packages, and streaming platforms. By examining the history of the reception of both shows from original broadcast, syndication, to streaming, I seek to understand how their index transforms each iteration of the shows and how each series continue to live due to their financial marketability to attract Black audiences for more business.

INDEX WORDS: Situational comedy, African americans, Television, Media industries, Historiography, Black produced sitcoms, Syndication, Streaming, Broadcast television

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Allyson Felecia Smith

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Film, Video, and Digital Imaging

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2021

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December 2021

## **DEDICATION**

To Michael, Felecia, and Allan. Thank you.

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To my committee, thank you. To Dr. Alessandra Raengo, thank you for taking the fear out of theory and putting the fun in it. You challenged me to always dig deeper and make it applicable. You showed me how to make it clear for all to understand. To Dr. Ethan Tussey, thank you for showing me the wonderful world of media industries. You showed me how to connect the dots and to embrace my love for television. Your amazing academic advisement brought me to this point. To Dr. Jade Petermon, thank you for encouraging me, stretching me, and advocating for me. You taught how to navigate this process while balancing life. Your advisement, care, and wisdom through this process is immeasurable. I am a better scholar (and still growing) because of each one of you. Thank you.



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## 1 INTRODUCTION

By the summer of 2021, over 20 Black cast sitcoms from the 1970s until the 2010s are available on seven different streaming platforms. Amid social unrest and the global pandemic, these media companies have offered a nostalgic escape with a spoonful of Black social responsibility. The availability and access of such a vast catalog of Black cast sitcoms have not been available since many of these series' original broadcasts. Fan pages, editorials, and articles circulate about Black cast sitcoms as new properties are continuously announced. Some shows such as *227* (NBC, 1985-1990) and *Roc* (FOX, 1991-1994) are available for consumption after being out of syndication for years. Many other shows made the transition to streaming while still being available in syndication consistently since their original run. Two such shows are the Black cast post-secondary education sitcoms *A Different World* (NBC, 1987-1993) and *The Parkers* (UPN, 1999-2004). These Black college series speak to the question of Black social mobility. They are friendship-based sitcoms that allow for diverse characters and views to converge around various social issues and experiences. It is their ability to capture the young Black life that makes them lucrative and viable for niche audiences in the original broadcast, syndication, and streaming.

What led to the creation of shows about Black college students? From 1984 to 1992 *The Cosby Show* on NBC showcased images of Black prosperity and social mobility in the post-Civil Rights era. The 1987 spin-off *A Different World* answers the question: how can Black people gain social mobility? The show's answer is to get a college education. From 1987 to 1993, *A Different World* focused on showing African American students navigating their experience at an elite Historically Black College and University (HBCU). The show examines the tensions of Black social mobility, and the issues students face. 12 years later in 1999, a new network, UPN,

continued to display the image of Black Americans seeking social mobility through education with a show entitled *The Parkers*. *The Parkers* is a spin-off of *Moesha* which centers on a teenage daughter in a middle-class Los Angeles family. In *The Parkers*, we follow a mother and daughter who are both enrolled in the same community college in the Los Angeles area. The show examines how higher education is accessible to all despite socio-economic or family backgrounds. While the characters have different backgrounds, the shows are similar in production culture, text, and the ways in which they are utilized for various networks, channels, and streaming platforms to capture niche audiences.

If both images are the same, why are *A Different World* and *The Parkers* seen as different shows and rarely programmed together? Similar images of Blackness mean that the images cannot be read at the surface but must be read at their index. With these Black cast sitcoms, one must ask how does the original broadcast, syndication, and streaming platforms shape how one identifies the series as different? The indexicality of Black sitcoms informs how the properties are received. The index shows us what the image connects us to historically, culturally, and socially. According to scholar Alessandra Raengo the index's purpose is "to suggest 'the mute presence of an uncoded event.'...The index affirms without knowing what it affirms, but because it claims a physical or existential connection to its source, resemblance or likeness supply the supposed content to a connection that is already intractably there." (Raengo, 30). This means that Black images are never read at that the surface but read at their index. They are read through the filter of what the image is connected to socially, historically, and its creators. Inspired by Raengo's use of the indexicality, this work looks at the index from a media industries perspective. Black cast sitcoms are read based on what they are connected to in production, cast, distribution, and reception. In other words, *A Different World* and *The Parkers*, while similar, are

read by their index. In this thesis, I seek to understand how *The Parkers* and *A Different World* are similar television shows whose reception is impacted by how each series is indexed to their original production culture, syndication packages, and streaming platforms. By examining the history and reception of both shows from original broadcast, syndication, and streaming, I seek to understand how their index transforms each iteration of the shows as well as how each series continue to survive due to their financial marketability to attract Black audiences for more business.

The method is primarily a historical work that utilizes textual analysis and production culture studies. It will follow *A Different World* and *The Parkers* from production to syndication. This will allow me to situate Black cast sitcoms in their historical context. Textual analysis is utilized of both the hypotext, a term coined by French theorist Gérard Genette, (*The Cosby Show* and *Moesha*), and hypertext (*A Different World* and *The Parkers*). This is utilized to see differences in messaging around character analysis, narrative, and structure. The media studies theoretical framework is a circuit of media study as described by Julie D'Acci. This framework includes four components: cultural artifact, production, reception, and sociohistorical context. This framework will lay the foundation to explain how the reception of *The Parkers* and *A Different World* is formed based on their index during the life cycle of each series.

My site of analysis will be in text, reception, and production culture. I will also utilize the archives of trade publications, interviews, behind the scenes footage, to gather reception of the shows during their run. The method for obtaining and analyzing the objects is through streaming services. To understand the hypertext I must engage with the hypotext to get a better understanding of the preferred reading as described by Stuart Hall. *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World* are available to stream on Amazon Prime. *Moesha* and *The Parkers* are

available on Netflix as of 2020. Netflix has edited the original music, due to cost, R&B and Hip Hop, from artists of the era, from both series. In 2021, *Moesha* and *The Parkers* become available to stream on Amazon Prime and BET Plus respectively. These streaming apps have the original music as it aired for each series. Thus to get as close to the original episodes, I watched these series on Amazon Prime and BET Plus. The sitcoms are watched in historical and chronological order and as originally aired. I watched the spin-off series as they aired with the original series. *The Cosby Show* would air at 8:00 pm followed by *A Different World* at 8:30 pm. *Moesha* and *The Parkers* aired the same way. My method for watching the show is as follows:

The Cosby Show: Season 1- 4 (1984-1987)

The Cosby Show: Season 5-8 with A Different World: Season 1-5 (1987-1992)

A Different World: Season 6 (1992-1993)

Moesha: Season 1-4 (1996-1999)

Moesha: Season 5-6 with The Parkers: Season 1-2 (1999-2001)

The Parkers: Season 3-5 (2001-2004)

Watching the shows in the original order allows for the encoded message around Black social mobility and higher education access in *The Parkers* and *A Different World*.

The outline of my chapters will follow the history of the reception of *A Different World* and *The Parkers* from its original production to its current iteration in the digital space. Part One will examine the production culture and sociohistorical context that led to the creation of these two series. By examining this history, we can see how the images are indexed to their production culture which in turn impacts its reception. This will be an analysis of the critical reception around the series while it was live on air. I will examine the critical and rating reception of the series and how they differentiate or are similar. Part Two will follow the series' receptions from

broadcast and cable syndication to streaming. An analysis of how the series reception is recontextualized based on how the shows were curated past their ending dates. There will be an examination of the nostalgic reception as these shows create new fans and scholarly discourse. Part three looks at the digital curation of these shows, fan culture, and the effects on audience reception in the digital space. It will be a comparative analysis on the convergence of history, production culture, and reception of *The Parkers* and *A Different World* to understand how these sitcoms' reception is informed and in turn impacts the series curation. In the end, I seek to deconstruct my own miseducation around representation rooted in Black elitism and respectability that fostered binary reception and how this impacts the curation and preservation of Black media.

## 2 SEASON 1: ORIGINAL BROADCAST

### 2.1. Episode 1: NBC and The Cosby Show

By 1983 there are several new cable channels competing with the three broadcast networks. The networks established at the advent of television are Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), American Broadcasting Company (ABC), and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). The competition for programming is already steep amongst broadcast networks, but new competitors enter the race with targeted demographic and boutique channels such as Home Box Office (HBO), Cable News Network (CNN), Black Entertainment Television (BET), Lifetime Television for Women, and Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN). As Broadcast networks suffered from a rise in production costs and a decrease in advertisement dollars, their viewership numbers decline as cable channels and home video consumer numbers increase. (Holt, 70). At the same time, the sitcom format is declared dead in many media outlets. The oldest of the three broadcast networks, NBC is looking for new ways to draw in more viewership. The historic network turns to a former NBC African American sitcom star: Dr. William H. Cosby, Jr. Bill Cosby was no stranger to creating programs around African American stars.

NBC historically has cast Black entertainers in their primetime programming while receiving positive public reception. In 1939, the first television program with an African American star debuts with *The Ethel Waters Show*. While ABC and CBS ran programs to great criticism such as *Beulah* (ABC, 1950-1953) and *Amos N' Andy* (CBS, 1951-1953) respectively in the 1950s, NBC ran the *Nat King Cole Show* (1956-1957) to great public support. The first Black sitcom with an African American female lead, *Julia* (NBC, 1968-1971) premieres in 1968.

NBC curates a certain type of image of Blackness in their programming: lack of Black dialect, well dressed, and respectable Negroes with mass appeal. It is the program that debuts in the peak of the Civil Rights era in 1965, *I Spy* (NBC, 1965-1968), that creates the star who would revive the sitcom format in the 1980s.

Bill Cosby starts his career in the early 1960s. Cosby's crossover appeal in *I Spy* earns him three consecutive Emmy awards. As a Black stand-up comic, Cosby cultivates a clean-cut family-friendly image. His characters are described as ones that "Did not visually address his Blackness or another character's Whiteness." (Dates, 305). This image reflects not only in his routines but also in the roles he takes and the content he produces. NBC, ABC, and CBS offers him several series to host and star in without much success: *The Bill Cosby Show* (NBC, 1969-1971), *The New Bill Cosby Show* (CBS, 1972-1973), *Cos* (ABC, 1976). By 1983, Cosby partners with television writers turned production company owners Marcy Carsey & Tom Werner. Carsey-Werner Productions along with Cosby produce *The Cosby Show*. Bill Cosby sees the sitcom as a counter-image response to the Blaxploitation eras a few years earlier (Bogle, 290).

Black representation in the 1970s media often focused on the Black urban experience. Films from the era such as *Shaft* (Parks, 1971), *Super Fly* (Parks, 1972), and *Uptown Saturday Night* (Poitier, 1974), which starred Bill Cosby, saturated the market with stories of Black urban life, crime, street dialect, and music. On television, shows such as *Sanford & Son* (NBC, 1972-1977) *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-1985), *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-1979) and *What's Happening!!* (ABC, 1976-1979) used the same urban settings, and character types as some Blaxploitation films. Cosby's desire was to create a show that is the opposite of these images. Cosby promoted the message that Black Americans share the same values as White Americans (Leonard, 142). Bill Cosby's intention was to create a show that highlighted a successful African



American family. His model was to create a sitcom about Black social mobility without overtly speaking on societal issues. Yet the Regan Era, with color-blind ideology and uncritical multiculturalism, was still a hostile environment for Black Americans. It is an era of a “complicated and dynamic relationship between politics, racial identity, and popular culture” (Leonard, 12) that lays the foundation for the style of *The Cosby Show*. Bill Cosby’s comedic style is reflected in the show: comedic humanism, “a general attitude that focused on the comic perceptions about the universality of the human condition seen within the framework of a strong proud African-American upper-middle-class family.” (Dates, 307). The entertainer studies how to be a “humane humorist.” It is this humane style of humor that helps gives the series mass appeal.

Bill Cosby’s need to promote an image of upper-class Black educated life required him to fill his creative production team with living examples of the image he is promoting. He brings on Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a Black Harvard-trained psychologist to make sure the images of Blackness promote a positive image to influence the Black community and White Americans. Additionally, Cosby hires Susan Fales, a biracial Harvard graduate and writer with family ties to Hollywood. Even the Black writing intern Yvette Denise Lee, later known as Yvette Lee Bowser, is a Stanford graduate. This creative team of elite educated writers along with Casey-Werner go on to produce an image of Black social mobility that promotes educational access.

The Huxtables on *The Cosby Show* encompass a doctor and a lawyer and their children who rarely discuss issues around race and class. Cosby instead signifies the family’s Blackness through cultural codes: music and art. The Huxtables focus on wealth and success as a by-product of high morals and an even higher work ethic. This messaging is reflected in media of the era, such as *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982-1989), *Facts of Life* (NBC, 1979-1988), and *Diff’rent*

*Strokes* (NBC, 1978-1985/ABC, 1985-1986), and lays the foundation for programming centering around social mobility. We witness the Huxtable family living a very comfortable lifestyle with five children in Brooklyn. The image of Black wealth and stability had rarely been seen on television apart from the short-lived ABC series *Barefoot in the Park* (ABC, 1970) and *The Jeffersons*. *Cosby*'s message is education as a vehicle to securing the American dream. (Leonard, 142). For example, each college age Huxtable child has an episode centered on college plans, post college graduate plans, or international travel excursions. This highlights the disposable income of the Huxtables and the elite college spaces to which they have access.

The show frequently references prestige colleges throughout the run of the show. They are often mentioned by characters and Cliff Huxtable often wears collegiate paraphernalia. When the show begins, the oldest daughter is at Princeton University. Denise is in the process of deciding her post-high school plans. Theo's grades are struggling, and the fear is that he will not be able to get into a good college. However, the sitcom's finale is Theo's graduation from New York University. We experience the youngest daughters Vanessa and Rudy grow up with the former heading off to Lincoln University, one of the oldest HBCUs, college in the later seasons. Clair, Cliff, and the Huxtable parents are graduates of the fictitious Hillman College. The message is for Black Americans, there is nothing greater you can do than to receive an education to enter the middle and upper class. It is under this notion that at the end of a season two episode, Denise announces that she is choosing Hillman College over New York University, University of North Dakota, Berkeley, and University of Hawaii. It is not until the season 3 finale that we see the Huxtables visit Hillman College and paving the way for a spin-off. *Cosby* not only seeks to tell the story of Black college students, but also to expand his creative reach in television.

## 2.2. Episode 2: A Different World

*The Cosby Show* moved from number three in the Nielsen ratings to number one by the third season where it would remain until the sixth season (Jicha, April 30, 1992). The series ratings allow for a spin-off to be greenlit. *A Different World* is launched to follow its hypotext, *The Cosby Show*, on Thursday night to add to Black cast sitcoms on NBC released after the success of *The Cosby Show: 227* (1985-1990) and *Amen* (1986-1991). Created by Bill Cosby to show the Black middle-class experience in a collegiate setting. Originally titled *Stepping Up to Step Out* (Cooper, May 25, 2021), Susan Fales and Yvette Lee moved to the spin-off to help write the series. The first season, with Denise Huxtable as the sophomore star, follows the humor of *The Cosby Show* but does not reflect the experience of an HBCU. After *The Cosby Show* actress Phylicia Rashad guest-starred in the first season, she had a conversation with Bill Cosby about the direction of the show. Cosby then contacted Debbie Allen, a graduate of Howard University and sister of Phylicia Rashad, to be the producer of the show, removing Anne Beatts as executive producer. Allen remained executive producer for the remainder of the series. In a 1989 interview with *The Washington Post*, Allen describes transforming the show:

“Allen turned to story content. ‘We wanted the show to be topical, but still funny,’ she said. She spent time with the program's writers. She wanted the show to be more adult -- young adult, that is -- rather than having the students come off like high schoolers. She wanted the audience to see them becoming politically, socially, economically, and sexually more mature. "That's what happened to me at Howard," she said.” (Hill, August 13, 1989)

Not only does the style change, but following Lisa Bonet’s pregnancy and marriage, she is removed from the series and placed back on *The Cosby Show*. The newly transformed series runs for six seasons. Audiences follow the students from college through graduate school and careers. The focus shifts from Denise’s experience to the lives of six college students: Whitley

Gilbert, a southern belle looking to marry for money. Dwayne Wayne, a Brooklyn math genius who is ambitious and initially girl hungry. Dwayne's best friend Ron Johnson, the son of a Detroit car dealership owner whose passion for business and music matches his passion for women. Jaleesa Vincent, a 26-year-old divorcee who is starting over at Hillman. Post Debbie Allen cast members include ambitious freshmen Kimberly Reese, the pre-med daughter of a cop, and Winifred "Freddie" Brooks, a biracial flower child and student activist. All the characters come from nuclear families despite coming from a range of socioeconomic classes. To round out the campus cast of the series we have Mr. Gaines, the owner of The Pitt, the student eatery, whose down-home wisdom guides the students. Dorm director and graduate student Walter Oaks. And finally, Professor of Math and Military Science, Colonel Bradford Taylor. Unlike *The Cosby Show*, we are given characters with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds where class conflicts are regularly discussed.

Diverging from *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, deals with college issues such as class, identifying careers, social life, and relationships: the latter which became the focus of the show. Because *The Cosby Show* did not address issues around race, class, and social justice, *A Different World* became the outlet to deal with such topics in primetime. Episodes deal with issues such as: AIDS, apartheid, racism, date rape, domestic violence, and colorism to name a few. Whereas *The Cosby Show* had a "concerted effort to highlight the shared values of Whites and Blacks, [...] *A Different World* goes great lengths to highlight the differences and ruptures as well." (Leonard, 142). While they both focus on Black identity formation, *Cosby* focuses on cultural practices and signifiers while *A Different World* does it through a focus on the sense of community, identity, and cultural practices found at HBCUs. (Leonard, 142). It is the final season's premiere episode on the L.A. Riots that Debbie Allen says began the demise of the

show and tension with NBC (Goldstein, 2015). By the end of the series run, its message was that social the responsibility that comes with social mobility. The emphasis on politics, gun violence, domestic violence, failing schools, Amnesty International, unemployment and the recession are pushed to the forefront. With *The Cosby Show* ending in the fifth season of *A Different World*, the HBC show is moved around in schedule with some episodes not airing until syndication. The series is canceled in 1993 due to the shuffling of its schedule that caused low ratings.

*A Different World* and *The Cosby Show* sought to capture the Black middle-class experience and the experience of those working toward that end. However, *A Different World* focuses on the tension between Black social mobility and the responsibility of the talented tenth to uplift the 90% supposedly left behind. The sitcom's index to NBC, as an established network that historically gave Black actors lead roles in series, also embraced the networks respectability politic with respect to African American material. Not only did Black actors serve as leads, but except for *Sanford & Son*, series on this network are often well led by characters who rarely utilize African American dialect or gag humor. *A Different World* is also indexed to Bill Cosby who has pushed a family friendly media image despite years of sexual assault allegations in his personal life. It is through Cosby and NBC that *A Different World* is read as a respectable and authentic image of Blackness with social responsibility. It is the sitcom's message of social responsibility that contributes to the series demise. By 1994, *A Different World* and *The Cosby Show* are off the air, yet other networks see the economic value in catering to Black audiences.

### **2.3. Episode 3: FOX Paves the Way**

The success of *A Different World* and *The Cosby Show* inspired a Black cast sitcom renaissance of the late 1980s and early 1990s. NBC continues with shows like *Fresh Prince of*

*Bel-Air* (NBC, 1990-1996). ABC introduces *Family Matters* (1989-1998), *Sister, Sister*, (1994-1995/WB 1995-1999), and *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper* (1992-1997). The well-trod network strategy of targeting Black audiences to drive up ratings and business is embraced with the introduction of the fourth broadcast network, just one year after *The Cosby Show* debuts: FOX. FOX's goal was to challenge the big three networks and gain revenue to compete. To do so, they needed to attract an audience that would draw in numbers close to the big three networks. "To penetrate the other networks' hegemony, FOX initiated a strategy to appeal to inner-city, urban consumers. It went after the Generation X and hip-hop youth who found little on network television to attract their attention." (Lusane, 14). FOX introduces a show that is originally titled, *Not Cosby* called *Married...with Children* (FOX, 1987-1997).

*Married...with Children* is co-created by the co-creator of *227*, Michael G. Moye, as an anti- *The Cosby Show*. By 1990, it is a series that ranks in the top shows for Black audiences. One of the writers from the sitcom is Ralph Farquhar. Farquhar is an African American writer, who later becomes a producer, who worked on the FOX inaugural sitcom from 1987-1993. Farquhar soon left to develop his own FOX series *South Central* (1994) and *The Sinbad Show* (1993). As FOX establishes itself as a competing major network, Black television creatives seek to expand their audience demographics beyond the young and urban consumers they were attracting with new shows: *In Living Color* (1990-1994), *Roc* (1991-1994), *Martin* (1992-1997), *The Sinbad Show* (1993-1994), *South Central* (1994), and *Living Single* (1992-1997) who is created by *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World* writer Yvette Lee Bowser. These shows found great ratings success. The Black cast sitcom program blocks found on NBC and Fox become the programming model for other start-up networks and cable stations to follow to build audiences. As Beretta Smith-Shomade states,

“FOX’s spate of programs in the 1990s, and UPN and the WB in the late 1990s and into the 21st century, all provided the preponderance of programming featuring African-American characters and stories over the latter part of network television history.” (Smith-Shomade, 14)

Just as *The Cosby Show* helped turn around NBC’s sitcom format, Black cast sitcoms are utilized to launch the three new broadcast networks.

When FOX is founded in the mid-1980s, it was the landscape of Broadcast networks and Cable channels that laid the foundation for Rupert Murdoch to capture the audience through programming. Most importantly, Murdoch bought cheaper affiliate stations in major urban markets where many African Americans could be found in concentrated areas. With FOX’s limited access to a broad national market, it also found that majority of the viewership was in areas where the Black population was highly concentrated such as Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Atlanta. Seeking a niche audience gave the network the freedom to create shows that would not be found on the big three networks. They were able to do this by offering creators the opportunity to create original programming not seen on ABC, CBS, and NBC by the 1990s.

Also in the 1990s, we enter the era of deregulation under the Clinton administration. The FCC passed deregulations in 1992 allowing for broadcast networks to own cable systems. (Holt, 136). As Holt describes, “In revising the ban on networks’ owning cable systems, the commission did impose safeguards, including subscriber caps on national and local ownership, which sharply limited the networks’ ability to acquire larger cable systems.” By 1994, FOX begins to move from targeted demographic programming to programs with global appeal. This is a response to their purchase of New World Communications. To achieve their mass appeal, four Black cast sitcoms shows are canceled prompting protests from the NAACP: *In Living Color*, *Roc*, and *The Sinbad Show*, and *South Central*. FOX promised its creators the freedom to make whatever they want with little to no investment. Now the creators who changed the network were

being thrown out because FOX had already acquired the cultural capital it was searching for to build their brand.

With FOX earning the rights to the NFL, the nail is in the coffin for the niche audience that helped build the new network. The new network is now focused on the audience that advertisers always wanted: white and middle class. FOX cancels all its programming created by Black creatives in 1997. It is the spate of affordable affiliate stations, programming for niche audience, deregulations and forced exit of Black creative talent that FOX left behind that will pave the way for the Black creative and cast sitcoms on the fifth and sixth broadcast networks: Warner Brothers (WB) and the United Paramount Network (UPN).

#### **2.4. Episode 4: UPN and Moesha**

The United Paramount Network (UPN) launches in 1995. It is not Paramount's first attempt at owning a network. The media company previously owned the failed DuMont Network in the 1950s where they aired another Black cast program *The Hazel Scott Show* (DuMont, 1950). Soon after the deregulations under the Clinton administration, Viacom purchases Paramount. Viacom, a syndication-based company, later make an agreement with Chris Craft Company who owns several affiliate stations. UPN mirrors a network that launches one year earlier, the WB, which is birthed out of a partnership between WB, Time Warner, and Turner. Whereas the WB launches with Black cast sitcoms: *The Parent 'Hood* and *The Wayans Brothers*, UPN debuted with *Star Trek: Voyager* and other sci-fi shows. However, except for *Star Trek: Voyager*, the other series are canceled after one season. With Viacom and Paramount Television being purchased, the network decides to replicate the WB and FOX's template and focus on targeted demographics. The following year The WB and UPN picked up Black canceled series from NBC and ABC: *In the House* (NBC, 1995-1996/UPN, 1996-1999), *Minor Adjustments*



(NBC, 1995/UPN, 1996), and *Sister, Sister* (ABC, 1994-1996/WB, 1996-1999), as well a pilot that CBS passed on created by three Black writers entitled *Moesha*.

*Moesha* (UPN, 1996-2001) is created by Ralph Farquhar who got his start at FOX, after his critically acclaimed FOX show *South Central* is canceled in 1994. The show is praised for its realistic portrayal of Black inner-city life. *South Central* received an award from Viewers for Quality Television, a group that uses viewer mail as leverage to petition the networks to save programs (Meisler, January 30, 1996). Farquhar moves on to another new network aimed at grabbing urban audiences to build their brand after being turned down by CBS. *Moesha* is co-created with Sarah Finney and Vida Spears, the first African American female writing team in television (Wolff, n/a). The creative team started together on *The Jefferson* moving to *Facts of Life* and *227*. They eventually ended up at *Family Matters* as writers turned producers. Much like *The Cosby Show*, *Family Matters* emphasis is on the shared moral values of Black and White families with cultural signifiers being music, fashion, dialect, and social justice issues. It is from *Family Matters* that they teamed up with Farquhar to create *Moesha*. *Moesha* seeks to portray inner city life from a middle-class perspective and through lighthearted comedy unlike *South Central*.

*Moesha* stars teen music star and actress Brandy. The sitcom focuses on her rebellion and upholding of her family's middle-class values. Her father and stepmother emphasize the need for high morals and a college education as the key to success. The series also is infused with Los Angeles hip hop culture. *Moesha* deals with difficult topics such as date rape, homelessness, race relations, teen pregnancy, and grief. We follow Moesha through high school and college with her friends: next-door neighbor Hakim, awkward dancer Niecy, and ditsy fashionista Kimberly Parker. Kim is played by Countess Vaughn, a veteran child actress from *227*. In the fourth

season as the friends figure out their post-college plans, audiences are introduced to Kim's mother, Nikki Parker. *Moesha* becomes ratings' hit ranking number one for UPN by its third season (Hontz, February 27, 1998). With the success of *Moesha* and other Black cast sitcoms on the network, a new series spin-off series is created and announced in 1999.

The spin-off is also created out of the behind-the-scenes tension between Countess Vaughn and Brandy. As Countess has shared in several interviews, it was a hostile work environment and constant fights with the sitcom lead.

“The popularity of ‘The Parkers’ was particularly galling to the Norwoods because of a feud between Brandy and Vaughn, who had been featured on ‘Moesha’ for the first four seasons as Kim, her boy-crazy best friend, production sources said. The two actresses were seen fighting constantly, and Brandy finally demanded that Vaughn be taken off the show. Because Kim was one of the comedy’s most popular characters, producers decided to create a new show involving her.” (Braxton, December 2, 1999)

The legend of the tension on the set of *Moesha* is eventually confirmed/spoofed in another Ralph Farquhar series. In the episode entitled “Hooray for Iesha” of *The Proud Family* on Disney Channel, Penny Proud's favorite “UBM” series *Iesha* is canceled. Penny Proud visits the set to find out the lead actress playing Iesha named Sonny, played by Gabrielle Union, is unfriendly and difficult to work with and rude to castmates. The episode ends with Penny watching another UBM show entitled "My Momma and Me.", alluding to the real-life *Moesha* spin-off.

When Brandy asks producers to remove Countess from the show, two of the creators, Farquhar and Finney-Johnson, go work on *The Parkers*. After the launch of *The Parkers*, it is published that there is tension between Vida Spears and Sonya Norwood, Brandy's mother, and manager. Finney-Johnson and Farquhar leave Spears behind to manage *Moesha*. It is reported that Brandy and her mother wanted to make Brandy Executive Producer and focus on more

dramatic storylines. Spears disagreed and is eventually let go from *Moesha*. She joins *The Parkers* but leaves as a producer after the first season. Vida Spears does not work in television after this. While Spears has not made a public statement on her leaving the series, it can be inferred that the culture on the set of *Moesha* was indeed detrimental. *Moesha* ends one season after the departure of its creators. The show that helped launch a startup network built on Black cast sitcoms, much like FOX, found itself unraveling from its production culture as other Black cast sitcoms on the network come and go. While *Moesha* focuses on the growing pains of a Black teen, it is the professional tension on set that leads to the creation of a spin-off.

### **2.5. Episode 5: The Parkers**

*The Parkers* is initially a vehicle for comedian Mo'nique and slated to be titled *Mo'nique* (Adalian, July 19, 1999). Mo'nique is a stand-up comedian featured on HBO's *Def Comedy Jam* (1992-1997) and BET's *Comic View* (1992-2008) known for her raunchy and vulgar humor. She never acted before taking on the role of Nikki Parker. The show shifts to a shared starring vehicle for Vaughn and Mo'nique where we focus on mother and daughter relationships while attending the same college. The pilot episode "It Takes Two" aired during the fourth season of *Moesha*, introduces audiences to plus-size Nikki Parker, a teen mother and high school drop who returns to high school with her daughter. After realizing that she will be graduating, she and Kim end up visiting the same college: Santa Monica College, a real California state community college. At the time of *The Parkers*' premier, there are only two new series premiering with African American leads: *The Parkers* and *Grown-Ups* (UPN, 1999-2000) starring Jaleel White from *Family Matters* fame. By 1999, many of the 1990s sitcoms were canceled or retired. That same year saw the end of most of WB's Black programming block including *The Parent 'Hood*, *The Wayans Brothers*, and *Sister, Sister*. This launches the second NAACP boycott of the decade

demanding more Black cast and produced television programs from the networks (Mifflin, July 13, 1999). The *Parkers* ushered in the next generation of Black cast sitcoms as the WB pulled away to focus on white teen programming. After the first season's success for the network of *The Parkers*, UPN releases *Girlfriends* (2000-2006/CW, 2006-2008), *One on One* (2001-2006), *Half & Half* (2002-2006), *All of Us* (2003-2006/CW 2006-2007), *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005-2006/CW, 2006-2009) and *Eve* (2003-2006).

*The Parkers* included the mother and daughter's roommates and classmates. Stevie van Low is a White female college student from a wealthy family who becomes Kim's best friend. T is a fraternity boy, and rapper. Andell Wilkerson, former owner of the teen hangout called The Den in *Moesha*, and Nikki's childhood friend. Professor Stanley Olgevee's Nikki obsessive love interest, Professor, and head of student activities. All the students come from homes with divorced or co-parents. The series ran for five years and ended in 2004, two years before UPN and WB merged into CW. The show's humor was rooted in fantasy and gags. There were gags that were often used special effects, episodes not rooted in reality, and lots of physical humor. Despite this, they still deal with heavy social issues: AIDS, blended families, homelessness, censorship, race relations, class conflicts, body image, and fatphobia. The series ends with Nikki graduating valedictorian and headed to a four-year school while Kim drops out of school to focus on her fashion business.

*The Parkers* is indexed to their network UPN. As a startup network who built their audience with Black cast sitcoms, it finds itself fledging. UPN is often mocked in Black media with even comedian Paul Mooney calling the network "U Pick a Nigga. Any Nigga," in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2001). The gag humor of the show along with the presence of two loud plus size Black women employing this humor often create a perception of the series as presenting a

low brow image of Blackness that is a very commonplace. Although the show takes place in the same setting as *A Different World*, they are often read as different shows due to the differences in their index to their networks and casts.

## 2.6. Episode 6: Differences and Similarities

Both *A Different World* and *The Parkers* tell the story of college students seeking social mobility through education. The shows are more alike than they differ, starting with production. *The Parkers* and *A Different World* are similar in their historical context, production culture, structure, and narrative. Both are spin-offs of family-oriented situational comedies, *The Cosby Show* and *Moesha*. These hypotexts both revitalized and helped launch networks with narrowcasting or seeking a targeted demographic for the audience of NBC, a major network, and UPN, a fledgling network, respectively. These series were created by Black men with a history of producing in television: Bill Cosby and Ralph Farquhar. The hypotexts focuses on middle-class Black family values in Brooklyn, New York, and the Leimert Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. The overall message for the children in both sitcoms is to obtain an education to be successful. Both spin-offs debut during the fourth season of their hypotexts. *A Different World* ran congruent after *The Cosby Show* on primetime for the remaining run of *The Cosby Show* and *The Parkers* also ran congruent after *Moesha* for the remainder of its seasons. *A Different World* and *The Parkers* are produced, directed, and written by Black women. Debbie Allen was brought in after the departure of Anne Betts as producer and director for *A Different World*. Sara Finney-Johnson, who also created *Moesha* with Vida Spears and Ralph Farquhar, is the creator, producer, and writer for *The Parkers*. Both shows were produced under the guidance of their hypotext creators Bill Cosby and Ralph Farquhar. While both shows have co-ed casts, they are led primarily by women: Jasmine Guy, Mo'Nique, and Countess Vaughn.

Not only are *A Different World* and *The Parkers* alike in production but also textually. Following the sitcom format, many of the staple plots are included: musical guests, special guest stars, very special episodes, flashbacks, holidays, and fantasy. Both sitcoms have episodes with the same plots, many college-themed: Student Government elections, Greek life, school censorship, Quiz Bowl competitions, Malcolm X vs Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. debates, AIDS, doppelganger, mentoring troubled youth, *Rashomon* influenced episode where flashbacks of a story are told through different perspectives, selling make-up to Black women, mothers who are Black musical stars, and weddings of the female lead disrupted by the male lead. The difference in these episodes is the comedic delivery. While *A Different World* used more humanist humor rooted in reality, *The Parkers* used more physical humor rooted in fantasy. For example, in the Malcolm X vs Dr. Martin Luther King episode of *A Different World* the opposing Civil Rights views are highlighted through a debate class project where students must reenact the Civil Rights leaders' one and only meeting. Meanwhile, freshmen Terrell and Charmaine encounter racist hecklers on the road near a school. Terrell carries a gun for protection, and debate of the episode surfaces around the use of non-violence. *The Parkers* episode around the same topic is a flashback episode. Professor Olgevee tells the story of how his uncle, Professor X, helps found the African American Studies Department and Black Student Union in a campus protest in the 1970s. Each character plays a character from the past. Professor X's method aligns with Malcolm X in getting the administration's attention. Mo'Nique's character aligns with King in using non-violent resistance using gags and physical humor. We witness as they hold a student protest to ask for African American studies, Black student union, and better admissions practices for Black students. Even with this difference, some topics are handled in similar manners. Both series episodes around AIDS deal with Black women living with the disease and have a serious

tone. Whereas *A Different World* begins the episode with a mature content warning from Bill Cosby and Raven Symone, *The Parkers* ends with a PSA on how to get tested for AIDS from Mo'nique and Countess Vaughn.

The episodes' topics that are different in the series show the difference in the campus culture. *A Different World* does not do any church episodes, a rarity in Black sitcoms, yet *The Parkers* has five episodes set in the church. *A Different World* fantasy episodes are explained as dream sequences: an episode that was shelved about Dwayne satirizing the 1992 election and Whitley's Christmas dream inspired by *A Christmas Carol*. *The Parkers* have several fantasy episodes that claim reality such as love potions and ghosts themes. It is also the type of post-secondary institutions that each series is set in that create differences in story. Due to Santa Monica College being a commuter school, *The Parkers* does not have residence halls themed episodes like curfew, dorm step teams, and dorm leadership as seen in *A Different World*. Likewise, with the fictitious Hillman College being private, *A Different World* has at least three episodes focusing on students looking for money to finance their education. *The Parkers* does not address how the students are financing their education. This may be due to the vast cost difference between private liberal art colleges and public community colleges.

The differences and similarities continue in the ratings. *A Different World* remains number two between *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-1993 in the Nielsen ratings. (Buck, December 16, 1987). For five out of its seasons, *A Different World* remained in the top 20, dropping only to 17. Four of the seasons it was in the top 5, often being number two between *The Cosby Show* and *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-1997), all Carsey-Werner productions. During the series' fourth and fifth season the college sitcom beat *The Cosby Show*, and did even better with African-American viewers. *A Different World* was the highest-rated show in the country with

black viewers, beating out other Black cast NBC shows *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *The Cosby Show*. (Zurawik, February 4, 1993) Even with such high ratings and critical acclaim, the series never received an Emmy award and was canceled a year after *The Cosby Show*. Due to the sixth season of shuffling the schedule and unaired episodes, the ratings dropped severely. Its cancellation came and went without fanfare, unlike the other critically acclaimed series that ended in 1993: *Cheers*, *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988-1993) and *Designing Women* (CBS, 1986-1993).

*The Parkers* remained at the bottom of the ratings with it peaking at number 97 (Bark, May 2, 2000) in the Nielsen Ratings after its first season. However, it was number one among Black households beating the WB's *The Steve Harvey Show* and UPN's former number one show *Moesha*. By its second season, both *Moesha* and *The Parkers* are 91 in Nielsen ratings Even with it being the number one prime-time series in black households it averages 2.1 million Black homes out of the 2.7 million homes overall (Sandomir, May 7, 1999). The highest-rated show on UPN is *WWF Smackdown* with the network's inaugural series *Star Trek: Voyager* coming in third. *The Parkers* is drawing more viewers than teen and college-based shows WB's *Felicity*, *Roswell*, and *Popular* even with the lack of publicity. "Parker's publicity is word of mouth." (Bark, May 2, 2000) As reported in *Variety*, "*The Parkers*, a spinoff of UPN's *Moesha* regularly ranks third among teens in its 8:30 p.m. slot and is averaging a 1.6/5 with adults 18-49, according to Nielsen. That's 67% above what UPN had averaged in the slot a year ago." (Adalian, October 8, 1999). By its fourth season, *The Parkers* fell to the fourth-highest show in Black households behind *Cedric the Entertainer Presents* (FOX, 2002-2003) and fellow UPN sitcoms *One on One*, *Girlfriends*, and *Half & Half*. Even with high ratings for both *A Different World* and *The Parkers*, their reviews are mixed.



When the series premieres, *The Parkers* is compared to *The Jeffersons* and called, “loud, broad comedy” (Bark, May 2, 2000). The reviews usually speak about the surprise success and charm of the show from critics.

“The Parkers, which initially faced pointed reviews from critics who decried its outlandish, over-the-top characters, has attracted more black viewers with its mix of broad comedy and character-driven stories than the lower-key, more sophisticated suburban-themed comedy of ABC's *The Hughleys* and the WB's *For Your Love*, which many people saw as a formula that might broaden the appeal of ethnic comedies.” (Braxton, April 28, 2000)

Not only is the series praised for drawing in audiences, but credit is given to Countess Vaughn’s performance.

“Even when she was a second banana on *Moeshia*, there was something sweetly poignant about Kim’s attempts to transcend her up-from-the-ghetto roots, and the college setting of *The Parkers*, combined with the comic combustion Kim has with her equally ambitious and argumentative mother, promises good, raucous fun.” (Tucker, September 10, 1999)

*The Parkers* does end up on the cover of JET magazine’s April 10, 2000 issue celebrating its success while interviewing the cast on the positive aspects and fan reactions from the show.

*A Different World* is panned by the critics in the first season with hopes about the second season turn around. With the changes to the show, the series receives critical acclaim.

“Whatever it was that was missing from the show last year is now there,” asserts Caryn Mandabach, president of the Carsey-Werner Co., which makes the series for NBC. “It’s just a whole new energy.” (Haithman, October 6, 1988).

After the transformation of the series, it receives even greater acclaim.

“Three years later, however, viewers are seeing a truly different *World*: an ensemble comedy about black college life that’s brightly acted, politically and socially attuned, idiosyncratic, and yes, even funny. This season, the series has silenced those who claimed it was only a coattail rating success bypassing *The Cosby Show* in the Nielsen’s (broadcast at 8:30 Thursdays, *World* ranks fifth, while *Cosby* has dropped to seventh).

And, in a development that's even more surprising, black artists behind and on-camera have assumed control of the series and helped it gain respect as well as viewers."

Both *A Different World* and *The Parkers* receive critical acclaim from media publications on television critics. What is interesting is how both series' creative team and cast would speak about one another with the debut of *The Parkers*. Mo'nique said of *The Cosby Show* and *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* that they were "comfortable" for White Audiences. Praises writers for "not worrying about being 'too Black or too white'." (Bark, May 2, 2000) There is no mention of *A Different World* found in past interviews from *The Parkers* cast and crew. However, a former *A Different World* writer would make remarks towards the new networks and their programming.

Yvette Lee Bowser said networks were dumbing down and ruining comedy when speaking about WB and UPN Black cast sitcoms. Even though she has a multiracial sitcom on the WB entitled *For Your Love*, she states, "There's a group of people who came along and created too many low-brow shows that featured African-Americans, and I think that devalued Black comedy." She continues her quote to VIBE magazine:

"I don't think we all have the same agendas . . . about the images we put out," notes Yvette Lee Bowser, creator of Fox's *Living Single*, who is now developing shows for NBC and the WB network. "Not all the 'stereotypical' or negative images you see of African Americans or other people of color come from people who don't belong to those groups," Bowser added. "Oftentimes, there are black producers behind those images and that's their particular worldview." (Salamon, March 1999)

At the time of both interviews, tensions are high with Black audiences, creators, and networks about the number of Black shows on the air. By the 1997-1998 television schedule, there are 22 shows between the 5 broadcast networks that star African Americans. However, by 1999 there are only 11 with only two not on WB and UPN: *Cosby* (CBS, 1996-2000) and *The Hughleys* (ABC, 1998-2000/UPN, 2000-2002). This leads to extensive coverage about what happened to Black roles on Broadcast television. However, this conversation often leaves out the

efforts of WB and UPN. *VIBE* magazine states that the 9 shows on air are on “wannabe fifth and sixth networks.” *Ebony* Magazine in October 2000 celebrates the ending of Whitewashing shows on the four major networks with Black representation in casts. However, the article barely mentions the Black cast shows of WB and UPN except for mentioning *The Parkers* is no. 1 amongst Black households and publishing a comprehensive schedule of Black roles on shows (Salamon, March 1999). An *Ebony* article from November 1999 speaks on the Blackout of shows on the four broadcast networks and emphasizes the place to view Black representations are on WB and UPN. By 2001, *Ebony* is celebrating the new Black shows on UPN that follow the success of *The Parkers*. Soon *Ebony* and *JET* begin celebrating the return of Black shows by focusing on the shows *The Parkers* ushered in after their first season.

*A Different World* and *The Parkers* as spin-offs reflect the style and vision of their hypotext’s creators. Whereas *The Cosby Show* and *Mo’Nique* focus on the family dynamics, their spin-offs examine the friendships of college students. It is also the state of their networks and creative conflicts that launch both series. While similar in many ways such as production culture and text, it is the shows’ different styles of humor that set them apart. The image of students seeking Black social mobility is what led to their popularity. Even with their success in the ratings for Black households, their reception would differ. It is the reception around both shows by not only critics, but also cast and crew that impact how they are read. *A Different World* is seen as an authentic portrayal due to its index to *The Cosby Show* with its humanistic approach to humor. The show is held at a high regard. In fact, it’s held in such a high regard that its members of the creative team are often interviewed to share their perspective on the state of Black sitcoms during *The Parkers* run which coincide with the cancellation of many Black sitcoms. It is the glaring negative reception around UPN and WB Black cast sitcoms that further deploy the

narrative of *The Parkers* being negative representation. *A Different World* and *The Parkers* are two sitcoms that tell the Black college experience. The reception of a television sitcom includes critical reviews and ratings. The reception a show receives while on-air helps determine its marketability for syndication.

### 3 SEASON 2: SYNDICATION

#### 3.1. Episode 1: A Different World in Syndication

Before both *A Different World* and *The Parkers* ended their television run, they were sold into syndication. Syndication is a business practice in television that has helped generate millions for companies past a series' final episode. Television programs are sold to local affiliate stations to fill in programming. Syndicated shows are programmed in two ways: strip scheduling and marathons (Gilbert, 689). Strip scheduling is running a program at the same time every day. For example, a rerun is scheduled Monday through Friday at 5:00 pm every day. Marathons are running a show in chronological order or by subject. In block scheduling, a show is programmed from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm by seasons or themes such as holiday episodes. It is the vastness of this local affiliate station's syndication programming and lack of materials on reruns that make it difficult to historically track scheduling for individual television series (Kompare, XIV). How a series is sold also impacts its programming. At a minimum, a series needs 65 episodes, but the standard practice is 100 episodes. There are two types of syndication deals for television programming. The first-run syndication is the practice of selling a show into syndication while still on the air. Off network-syndication happens once the series comes to an end (Ulin, 296). Both syndication practices are lucrative and add to the financial longevity of a show. Scholar Derek Kompare describes the practice, "In broadcasting today, the rerun -- whether off-network,

off-cable or off-first run -- is the nexus of a variety of revenue streams and industrial functions, all geared to maximize the returns on a familiar, stable property.” (Kompare, 134). This return is what keeps a series alive in public memory.

In the 1980s *The Cosby Show* changed the game by setting the tone for how series are sold into syndication. *The Cosby Show* operates as nostalgic watching in the same manner that the sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s operated in syndication in the 80s and 90s. For the Black community, *The Cosby Show* with its assimilated moral messaging is feel good television amid the ever-present racial reality. It is an escapist cultural depiction of Black wealth in America free from societal injustices. These injustices are only addressed as remnants of the Civil Rights era that the Huxtables have overcome. These shows create a canonized cultural depiction around education as a means of Black social mobility. However, it is *The Cosby Show* that presents a post-Civil Rights era that is comforting for Black people while simultaneously assuring White people that racism is over, thus making it prime property for mass syndication.

*The Cosby Show* is shopped around as a first-run syndication package in 1986 a year after the series debut. A sitcom being shopped for syndication a year after its debut is unprecedented at the time. *The Cosby Show* is sold into syndication during its fourth season for an unprecedented \$250,000 weekly with KUSI-TV Channel 51 paying three million for the syndication package (Brass, September 5, 1988). By the time the series moves from the first-run syndication to off-network syndication, the syndication package was worth one billion dollars. This makes it the first sitcom to hit this number (Benson, November 25, 2005). At the time of *The Cosby Show*'s initial syndication deal, it is published that there were no syndication plans for *A Different World*. This is standard since the series has only one season. It is the success *The*

*Cosby Show* syndication deal that launches a first-run syndication deal that many sitcoms follow, including *Moehsa* and *The Parkers*.

In 1990, *A Different World* is beginning its fourth season and is already in syndication. Along with *The Cosby Show* and *Roseanne* is sold as the first-run syndication (Hinman, December 6, 1990). *A Different World* syndication package is tied to *Cosby* in the syndication programming running both shows together usually playing at the family evening hour before primetime between 5:00 pm and 8:00 pm. The syndication package includes the billion-dollar *The Cosby Show* along with *Roseanne* and *A Different World*. (Benson, November 25, 2005). Thus, *A Different World* is often programmed with family sitcoms with mass appeal from the three major networks. Whereas *The Cosby Show* anchors people in the safety of wealth and family, *A Different World* and *Roseanne* show you the tension of this climb for Black students and a reminder that not all have been able to make this climb, including many White Americans. *Roseanne* is a family show that is not afraid to deal with tough topics in palatable way much like *A Different World*. The pairing of *A Different World* with *Roseanne* and its hypotext *The Cosby Show* indexes it to a comedy with concern about justice for all to understand. Programming it with shows from the three big networks, enforces the message that the college-based sitcom is respectable television made for all audiences. The company finds ways to gain greater leverage on the syndication package of their top three programs.

“The studio began offering stations the choice of licensing the aging all-barter evergreens as one, two, or three back-to-back half-hours for daytime. Clearance levels for the trio soared from 70% of the U.S. in year one, when sold individually, to 90% by the third year. Once clearance levels surpassed 80%, the distributor had enough coverage to attract national advertisers and cut the level of lower-margin direct-response sponsors in half. It also secured cable deals for *Cosby* and *Roseanne* on TBS, the WGN Superstation, and Nick at Nite; they rank among Nick's highest-rated shows.” (Benson, November 25, 2005).

Nick at Nite is Nickelodeon's nightly programming block which focuses on reruns of sitcoms from previous generations. By the 2000s, Nick at Nite shifts from sitcoms of the 1970s to sitcoms of the 1980s. (Kompore, 184). *A Different World* ran on local stations before and during the series time on Nick at Nite. In 2004, Nick at Nite is the number one watched television channel amongst Black households due to *The Cosby Show* and *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. (Smith-Shomade, 88). By 2006, Nick at Nite aired the first of many *A Different World* reunion shows in 2006 (MCN Staff, July 13, 2006). The series was programmed with family-based sitcoms from the three major networks: *The Cosby Show*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Roseanne*, and *Full House* (ABC, 1987-1995). A week-long marathon featured cast interviews entitled "Hillman College Reunion." Vignettes between episodes and commercial breaks featured the casts reuniting, including Denise. In each vignette, the actors portray their characters as adults sharing where they believed the other characters are in life. Nick at Nite's desire to draw in younger audiences, is seen through the programming of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *A Different World*. The channel makes sure that the line-up is diverse with *Full House* and *Roseanne*, which shows that they are not seeking to market to niche audiences.

Eventually, *A Different World* moves to TV One, a new Black cable network launched on syndication of Black cast sitcoms and films. TV One is launched with "acquired programs like reruns and movies [which] make up 70 percent of TV One's schedule." (Lee, 2007). *A Different World* moves to TV One in 2010, a cable channel launched to compete with BET. At the time of its launch, BET has been sold to Viacom. It is facing media backlash from Black critics and those in media for negative portrayals of Black Americans in media (Smith-Shomade, 109). TV One syndication programming is around Black cast sitcoms such as *Sanford & Son*, *The Jeffersons*, *Living Single*, and *Moesha*. *A Different World* is often paired with *Living Single* in its

scheduling. This programming and new channel indexes the show to Black young adults seeking social mobility on a channel committed to showing positive images of Blackness. By 2014, another Black entertainment channel, Bounce TV, purchases the rights to the show along with *Roc*, *The Parent Hood*, and *The Hughleys* as programming that leads into primetime. (Hudson, December 14, 2014) This programming says that Bounce TV is a channel to see Black sitcoms not readily available in syndication that revolve around Black families from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds who dive into various social justice and community issues. *A Different World's* move to a new start-up Black cable network to boost engagement is not new and replicates the model of BET. *A Different World* signifies that these new Black cable channels are invested in images of middle-class Blackness. The sitcom eventually made its way to BET where another college-based sitcom was already in syndication: *The Parkers*. *The Parkers'* journey to BET starts with UPN's first sitcom syndication deal.

### 3.2. Episode 2: The Parkers in Syndication

With the success of *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World* as well as many other shows' first-run syndication deals, UPN looks to cash in on their own syndication packages. *Moesha* is shopped for syndication deals after its first season (Hontz, March 6, 1997). The sitcom is sold into syndication to TBS in 1997 with 88 episodes set to premiere in 2002 along with *The Parent Hood* as first-run syndication. The series is sold after the acquisition of *The Drew Carey Show* (ABC, 1995-2004), *Coach* (ABC, 1989-1997), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Roseanne*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Friends* (NBC, 1995-2004) (Richmond, July 1, 1997). Within a month's time of this deal, *Moesha* is sold to an additional twenty-five stations.

“It's unusual for a sitcom to be sold so far in advance, but with other ethnic and netlet sitcoms out being sold now, sources say Worldvision didn't want to fall behind. It's



expected that off-netlet sitcoms probably won't penetrate as deeply outside the top markets." (Hontz, May 9, 1997).

To capitalize on the niche audience of *Moesha*, Paramount Domestic Television also partnered with the African Heritage Network to handle the domestic barter sales for *Moesha* (Schneider, April 5, 2000).

In 2001, Paramount Television Division announces plans to sell *The Parkers* in syndication as part of the 55,000 titles in the library a year after the Viacom-CBS merger (Schlosser, January 14, 2001). The sitcom finds success on local channels for syndication years after its finale. For example, the series replaces syndicated news on CBS in Detroit in 2012 along with *Girlfriends* and *One on One* (WADL TV, May 23, 2012). *The Parkers* local syndication scheduling with a station such as CBS Detroit highlight the desire to market to Black audiences in urban markets. It is local television programming catering to niche audiences with all Black programming. In 2003, *The Parkers* closed their syndication deal with BET and CBS. By 2004, the series has the first-run syndication with local stations and BET (Brown-Hinds, January 29, 2004).

After Bob Johnson, the former owner of BET sells the network to Viacom, the channel seeks to attract new audiences and BET rebrands itself from video music content to syndication programming.

"There's a plan in place to further diversify what BET has to offer and augmenting our lineup with more syndicated programming is part of that plan," said Lee. "For us, 2003 will be a year full of evolution for BET. In recent years, we've leveraged more market research, audience analysis, focus groups and direct viewer feedback into our programming decisions. Many of those findings are direct contributors to this shift in BET's focus to reach an even broader audience, including more African-American women." (BET Press, January 8, 2003)

The shift to capture more African American women impacts the syndication content the cable channel will purchase. By 2003, they landed the deal needed to help with the rebrand. “BET has taken its most substantial step to date in the competitive world of syndicated programming by signing a multi-year deal with Paramount Domestic Television to carry the off-network cable syndication.” (BET Press, January 8, 2003). The deal included *The Parkers*, *Girlfriends*, and *Soul Food* (Showtime, 2000-2004), BET’s first hour-long drama on the schedule. *The Parkers* become a part of the channel’s new syndication programming. Over the years it is often scheduled with Black cast sitcom *Martin*. The programming of the show with the series from FOX indexes the series to Black cast sitcoms which aired on start-up networks that launched with niche audiences. The style of physical comedy and gag humor are also present in both shows and star stand-up comedians. This further employs the reading of *The Parkers* as low brow comedy. Reruns of *The Parkers* still air on the channel to this day. At the time of BET’s switch to syndication, the public is finding another way to enjoy their favorite sitcoms. By 2005, BET is the number one watched Network among Black household thanks to the syndication of *The Parkers*, *Girlfriends*, and *Soul Food*. (Smith-Shomade, 88).

In 2014, *A Different World* becomes available to stream on Hulu (Essex, March 23, 2014). By 2015, the sitcom moves to Netflix. In 2017, *A Different World* is pulled from Netflix. This sparks several change.org petitions to Netflix to bring the show back, with the largest petition on Change.org, “Stop Netflix from removing A Different World on March 15<sup>th</sup>” reaching 4000+ signatures. However, *A Different World* along with the Carsey-Werner catalog is sold to Amazon Prime in 2017 (Spangler, August 3, 2017). By August 2021, the series is available on both Amazon Prime and HBO Max. Even with this move, there is still a gap of Black cast sitcoms available on digital platforms. In 2016, *The Washington Post* runs an opinion

piece asking where the Black cast sitcoms to stream are. Alyssa Rosenberg writes that series built around black characters have been somewhat slow to move to streaming services while pointing out how many never received full DVD releases, “but the list of shows that are not available *is* striking.” (Rosenberg, April 27, 2016). The author then goes on to suggest the financial viability created by the niche markets streaming platforms are missing by not purchasing the rights to Black cast shows:

“In other words, if streaming services want black consumers’ money, they have a ready-made solution: Get the streaming rights to preexisting shows about black characters, or greenlight more shows like them. At a certain point, if those services choose not to pursue this obvious means of developing new audiences, it’ll be hard to conclude that they’re leaving money on the table because in some cases, they just don’t want it.” (Rosenberg)

Soon, these platforms begin to capitalize on the Black audience streaming market because other sitcoms are being taken from exclusive platforms.

While some Black cast shows debut on Hulu in 2018, including *Living Single*, *Family Matters*, and *Hangin’ with Mr. Cooper*, the biggest announcement of Black cast sitcoms on streaming services would come in 2020. Two events converge to create the release of Black cast sitcoms on streaming platforms: White cast sitcoms *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1990-1998), *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013), and *Friends* (NBC, 1995-2004) leave Hulu and Netflix respectively to help launch NBC Universal’s Peacock and Warner Media’s HBO Max (Battaglio, September 19, 2019). This creates the need for Hulu and Netflix to purchase properties that can bring in more audiences. They return to an old method: utilizing Black cast sitcoms to draw in more markets. The second has to do with the uprisings that came because of the murder of African American George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police on May 25, 2020. On social media, activists began calling out media companies for a lack of Black representation. Although the deal was in

the works before Floyd's murder, the timing of the announcement aligned to capitalize on the global pandemic and social unrest.

In 2020, Netflix announces the acquisition of a slate of UPN and WB Black cast sitcoms, as part of their targeted demographic programming entitled Strong Black Lead: *Moesha*, *The Parkers*, *Girlfriends*, *The Game*, *One on One*, *Half & Half* and *Sister, Sister*. In 2021, *Moesha* and *The Parkers* are also available to stream on Amazon Prime with *The Parkers* also available on BET Plus. This is a massive success in 2020 as Netflix announces that *Sister, Sister* reached the Nielsen ratings. (Schneider, October 8, 2020). This leads to many other streaming platforms to release Black cast sitcoms in 2020 and 2021. Once again, Black cast sitcoms are at the forefront of launching new markets and audiences, this time in a digital space.

*A Different World* and *The Parkers* were both sold as first run syndication deals. Both properties have thrived in local syndication. It is the cable channels designed for Black audiences who utilized both series to either restructure their programming, draw in their desired audience, or launch the channel. *A Different World* and *The Parkers* have survived in public memory because of local syndication, BET, TV One, and Bounce TV. Both series' syndication success is the same, but their availability differs. *The Parkers*, with the lowest Nielsen ratings while on air, is consistently accessible through syndication, home video release, and streaming. *A Different World* often is removed from syndications packages in between deals. It is their success in syndication that leads to their to streaming deals. Once the sitcoms are available for streaming, new reception is birthed for both sitcoms rooted in nostalgia, fandom, and preservation. It is the life cycle of the series that has generated from original broadcast to streaming that fosters the digital reception, public memory, fandom, and scholarly reception around the series?

## 4 SEASON 3: DIGITAL AND WRITTEN PRESENCE

### 4.1. Episode 1: Streaming

The Netflix announcement of the acquisition of the WB and UPN Black cast sitcoms is met with great fanfare and media coverage. On July 29, 2020, Netflix's Strong Black Lead social media accounts posts a video montage of the stars from the newly acquired sitcoms. Sitcom leads from *Girlfriends*, *One on One*, *Half & Half*, *Sister, Sister*, *Moesha*, and *The Parkers* open the video with their characters' catchphrases followed by a collective announcement of their sitcoms' release on Netflix. The announcement on Twitter garnered 91.8K Retweets, 75.9K Quote Tweets, and 171.6K Likes. The Instagram announcement received 49,416 likes and 685,410 views. The announcement was also carried by major news outlets such as *Forbes*, *USA Today*, *LA Times*, and *CBS News*. Trade journals, blogs, and social media spread the word of the classic Black sitcoms acquisition soon to be available for streaming. As reported in several outlets and tweeted by Strong Black Lead, the acquisition comes about mainly at the requests of fans. Former Strong Black Lead editorial director Jasmyn Lawson shares in a blog post, "These classics have been at the top of our members' wish lists – and ours' – for a long time and we constantly see these shows named-checked in our conversations with them." (Jensen, July 29, 2020). The message is that the shows are available because of the high demand of Black cast sitcom fans.

However, the reality is fan requests are not enough to get the shows on a streaming platform. The rights for the series must be cleared. In seeking to purchase one property, Netflix was able to clear the rights and gain additional properties in the process. Bradley Edwards, manager, content acquisition at Netflix shares with *Variety* that, "We were shooting for one and we found seven and we made it work." (Schneider, December 10, 2020). Because the rights were

not exclusively sold to Netflix, this means that the creators and rights holder of the sitcoms can sell their properties to other streaming platforms. This leads to the newly acquired Netflix properties ending up at Amazon Prime and BET Plus by 2021.

Within a year of the Strong Black lead announcement, other Black cast sitcoms became available on various streaming services, some with social media announcements. HBO Max announces *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and a reunion show with all castmates. While publicity is around the Will Smith sitcom, they quietly release *The Wayans Brothers*, the sitcom that launched the WB, and *Eve*, a UPN sitcom that is left out of the Netflix deal. In July 2021, a year after the Strong Black Lead acquisition, Amazon Prime publicized the acquisition of the Norman Lear catalog highlighting *The Jeffersons*, *227*, *Sanford & Son*, *Sanford*, and *Good Times*. Apart from *227*, these properties were previously available to stream and On Demand through Starz. Black Entertainment Television's new streaming service BET Plus announces acquiring *Roc*. A year earlier the streaming service launched as the only streaming service to have *Martin* and is the only place for *The Jamie Foxx Show* (WB, 1996-2001). Hulu releases *My Wife and Kids* (ABC, 2001-2005) with a social media announcement while *All of Us* another UPN show is quietly released. Five years ago, there were editorials asking where the Black sitcoms are streaming. Today there are countless blog posts, think pieces, and articles ranking Black sitcoms, sharing where to stream, and memorable episodes to watch. It is the combination of an old industry's business practice and social-political climate that once again led to a resurgence in Black cast sitcoms, but this time their resurgence is based on reruns.

When "Strong Black Lead" announces their WB and UPN acquisition with a video montage, one thing is unique about the appearance of the stars: they are all at home. In 2020, the country is facing an unprecedented time: a pandemic and social unrest due to police killings of

unarmed Black citizens such as Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. While the pandemic forces a nation into the house, the police killings and calls for justice inspire a nation to hit the streets in protest. The need for entertainment, escapism, and support of all things Black come together to create the perfect climate for Netflix to launch their new streaming properties. Jasmyn Lawson shares with *Variety* how timing and climate lined up to create the success of Black sitcom streaming,

“We didn’t plan it that this should be in the times that we’re in, given the pandemic as well as the [conversation about] racial injustice, but I think specifically for Black communities, who are one of the most vocal communities on social media, people were just looking for moments of joy, moments to laugh, moments of escapism,” she says. “And now a new generation of younger kids are being able to discover this stuff.” (Schneider, December 10, 2020)

The practice of nostalgia watching is created out of the need to return to simpler times. A need to return to something comforting and familiar in completely unfamiliar times. *Sister, Sister* found itself in the top Nielsen ratings and *Moesha* ranked in the Top 10 on Netflix’s app. *The Parkers* was also in the Top 10 on Netflix. Netflix is not only utilizing this bulk acquisition to draw in niche audiences, but also to create signature programming under its Strong Black Lead moniker. The streaming service which started as a mail order DVD service, is now promoting itself as the place to see diverse images of Blackness and where fans’ requests can be heard. Not just requests for their favorite Black cast sitcoms, but also requests for more Black representation amid social injustice. Netflix’s announcement says that the company not only listens to Black voices but responds with request granted. Although much quieter, this is not the first time a Black cast sitcom’s availability on streaming lines up with the social climate.

In 2013, the Black Lives Matter is created after the acquittal of unarmed African American child Trayvon Martin’s killer. The movement arises again after the killing of the

African American unarmed child Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. Protests are launched and civil unrest begins with activists seeking justice for his racially profiled murder. As the Black Lives Matter movement begins to pick up momentum, students and activists across the nation start speaking publicly about their own experiences of racism on social media. Instances with the police, racial profiling by strangers, and encounters of microaggressions are at the social forefront with no sector of society exempt from scrutiny. Amongst these conversations, a few other significant events converge in this period. In 2014, “I, Too, am Harvard” is launched. “I, Too, Am Harvard” is a social media campaign speaking out about the racism Black students experienced at Harvard. (Vingiano, March 3, 2014). A year later, Black students at the University of Missouri speak out and protest their racist treatment on campus. As a new generation of Black students faces social unrest, they turn to an old series for inspiration. *A Different World*, which becomes available to stream in 2014 on Netflix.

As *A Different World* is available to watch as a commercial-free, on-demand binge amid Black social unrest, history begins to repeat itself. In 2016, HBCU’s see a surge in enrollment in not seen since the sitcom was on the air from 1987-1993. (NPR, September 16, 2016). When the HBCU sitcom originally aired, HBCU enrollment increased by 24.3% and all college enrollments went up by 16.8%. The social climate and Black students making their racist experiences public at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) converge to increase enrollment. However, *A Different World* being attributed to the spike is deemed a coincidence by HBCU scholar Dr. Mary Beth Gasman (Watkins, August 16, 2016). Although one could argue that historical patterns around the sitcom accessibility and HBCU enrollment numbers could make the streaming of the sitcom a small factor with enrollment. *A Different World* is seen as an



excellent example of Black success in higher education and contributing to many Black Americans' influence to attend college (Means Coleman, xiii).

With *The Parkers* being based on a real college, Santa Monica College, it begs the same post-secondary enrollment questions as *A Different World*. Was there a spike in out-of-state or Black student enrollment for the community college? Because Santa Monica College does not release their admissions demographics, it is difficult to tell if *The Parkers* had an impact on enrollment by race and out of state. We can see that enrollment did increase after the sitcom ended, but it is hard to tell if *The Parkers* had that impact without the Black student enrollment data. Santa Monica College is already a well-known college within California with a high transfer admissions rate to four-year schools. Founded in 1929, the college also boasts famous alumni such as Laila Ali, Hillary Swank, Sean Penn, Dustin Hoffman, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Paul Thomas Anderson, Ryan Seacrest, Kenan Thompson, and James Dean. The correlation between college-based media and enrollment numbers is a research question worth exploring. This also shows how the type of colleges that both series are indexed to also impact the reading. Although an HBCU, Hillman College is still portrayed as an elite private liberal arts college. This fact designated the series as the experience of elite Black students. Santa Monica College is a community college, formally known as a junior college. Even within *The Parkers* several references are made to the characters not attending or working at a real college. Community Colleges are often not seen as competitive as four-year schools, even though their graduates academically outperform their four-year school counterparts ([Sánchez](#), January 30, 2019). The lack of enrollment research around the institution compared to HBCUs and *A Different World* is reflective of the difference in the way the shows are covered in journalism.

## 4.2. Episode 2: Written Reception

Popular media reception around *A Different World* is vast. During the time of *A Different World*'s streaming debut and its move to Amazon Prime, numerous articles, blogs, and editorials have been released on the show's impact on Black college students. When the show is taken from Netflix, not only is it met with social media outrage and petitions but a commentary on the importance of the show to Black students in all settings. One commentary on *The Undeclared*, a sports and pop culture website owned and operated by ESPN, entitled, "A Different World still inspiring my generation of black college students: the show is no longer on Netflix, but the love still lives in our hearts" interviews students at HBCUs and PWIs on how the show has influenced them to be proud of their Blackness and speak about social issues (Wright, January 4, 2018). Articles dating back to 2011 reflecting on the nostalgia and power of the sitcom on Black students. List of greatest episodes, anniversary pieces on special episodes, countless mentions about HBCUs, and articles on how the series influenced generations of Blacks seeking social mobility. The latest *A Different World* article is from *Vanity Fair* and presents an oral history from cast, producers, and writers of the sitcom. Despite this wealth of reaction to *A Different World*, there are limited media pieces released on the influence of *The Parkers*.

Popular media reception of *The Parkers* mainly focuses on body positivity and the positive image of plus-size Black women. One such piece published by *The Curvy Fashionista* website is entitled, "How The Parkers Reclaimed The "Sassy, Fat, Black Sidekick" Narrative". *A Different World* is indexed as a show worthy of nostalgia written reflection due to its index to Bill Cosby, NBC, and elite HBCUs. Whereas *The Parkers* lowbrow comedy deems it another Black show lacking the type of print coverage that *A Different World* receives. The difference in

the popular media coverage between the two shows mirrors the difference in the academic discourse on the shows established when *A Different World* and *The Parkers* began syndication.

*A Different World* is featured in texts such as *Shaded Lives* and *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences* edited by Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, *African Americans on Television: Race-ing for Ratings* edited by David J. Leonard and Lisa A. Guerrero, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* by Robin R. Means Coleman, *African Americans on Prime Time Blues: Network Television* by Donald Bogle, *The Top 100 American Situation Comedies: An Objective Ranking* By Mitchell E. Shapiro, Tom Jicha, *The Comedy Studies Reader* edited by Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz, and *Watching Race* by Herman Gray. In these texts, chapters or entire sections are dedicated to the series. These academic writings focus on representation, capturing the Black diverse experience, and praising the positive portrayal.

However, mentions of *The Parkers* in academic discourse are limited to brief mentions in sections about UPN (Bogle) or discussions around its hypotext *Moesha* (Smith-Shomade). While both texts were produced at the beginning of *The Parkers* series, there is still a limited analysis of the series. Limited scholarly work on *The Parkers* reflects the lack of in-depth or growing scholarship that reflects positively on UPN, Black cast and produced sitcoms. Bogle relegates the Black cast and produced sitcoms from UPN and WB to five pages in the 469-page book. Bogle states:

“Critics cried that Black programs were being ghettoized on these networks and that the African American audience was being exploited with an array of old-style stereotypes. The quality of the shows varied. Most had dim-witted stories and characters.” (Bogle, 430)

*The Parkers* continue to have brief mentions in academic literature such as *The Sitcom Reader America Viewed and Skewed* By Laura R. Linder, *Beyond Demographics: Understanding the College Experience Through Television* by Barbara F. Tobolowsky, *Food Messages on African American Television Shows* by Manasi A. Tirodkar and *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism, TV-a-Go-Go Rock on TV from American Bandstand to American Idol* by Jake Austen, *Why TV Is Not Our Fault Television Programming, Viewers, and Who's Really in Control* by Eileen R. Meehan and *Media Diversity and Localism Meaning and Metrics* by Philip M. Napoli. These brief mentions focus on two conversations: UPN programming and the image of plus size women.

The disparities in scholarship reflect the often binary reception of negative and positive images of Blackness. Beyond that, scholars tend to write about what they are most familiar with or what reflects their own experience. *A Different World* reflects the tension of Black social mobility and community responsibility: the burden and blessing of the talented tenth to lift as one climbs. The show drives home the message to maintain your Blackness in any form while educating the masses. For *A Different World*, the diversity of the Black characters shows that Blackness cannot be defined. The series often promotes messages of social responsibility, community development, and the importance of educating others on different issues. It is this influence that impacts the robust scholarship and discourse around it. *The Parkers* falls into the category of shows that are seen as too gag-like and indexed to networks, BET and UPN/WB, that already have limited scholarship. The style of comedy of the series is often not spoken highly of in scholarship by scholars such as Donald Bogle and Alvin F. Poussaint. Bogle states about UPN series, “The quality of the shows varied. Most had dim-witted stories and characters.” (Bogle, 430). Alvin F. Poussaint states,

“Black television sitcoms have continued to showcase negative stereotypes, replacing the now politically incorrect Stepin Fetchit image with updated characterizations like the jive-talking swaggering Black men and loud-talking, hands-on-hips Black women who were the hallmarks of such shows as *Beulah*, *Good Times*, *That’s My Mama*, *What’s Happening!*, and *The Jeffersons*.” (Means Coleman, xi)

*The Parkers* align with the shows that Poussaint describes: a dim-witted daughter, loud talking plus size hands-on-hips Black woman yet are situated in a setting that often receives high praise for Black representation: the college campus. The setting alone should call for more scholarship around the series. The way the mother/daughter series is indexed to its network and syndication impact how its critical analysis. The distinction between the scholarly reception and robust coverage of *A Different World* has created a fetishization of the series that *The Parkers* lacks. The reception difference is not only present in journalism and academic writing for *A Different World* and *The Parkers*, but also in the digital presence of the fandom.

### 4.3. Episode Three: Fandom

*A Different World* and *The Parkers* fandom present itself differently on social media. There are several *A Different World* fan pages. The original fan page @adifferentworld8793 has 69.8K followers and is followed by the cast of the sitcom. The fan page was established in 2014, the same year *A Different World* became available for streaming on Netflix and Hulu. @thehillmanfiles is a fan account with 57.7K followers and was created in August 2020. Another fan page with a large following is @thechipmunk\_chronicles on Instagram account focuses on “Telling our stories through wearable art,” but primarily post fan art and images of *A Different World* along with iconic moments in Black popular culture, mainly television. Chipmunk is in reference to Dwayne Wayne’s family nickname. The page has 28.1K followers and was established in 2016. The account is also one of the online stores where Hillman College paraphernalia can be purchased. Since June 2013, the most popular website to

buy *A Different World* and Black Cast Sitcom paraphernalia such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Living Single*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Martin* is <https://www.hillmanbookstore.com/>. The store is launched on Instagram with its first post “America’s HBCU…” while advertising a Black male and female couple holding hands in Hillman College shirts. The original cast members including Jada Pinkett-Smith, who made her acting debut on the series have all been seen in Hillman College shirts. The page of 25.9K followers has celebrities and activists such as Amanda Seales, Tarana Burke, Issa Rae, Yvette Nicole Brown, Matthew A. Cherry, and Lena Waithe in clothing from the store. Lena Waithe even named her production company “Hillman Graduate”. There are at least five other *A Different World* Instagram fan pages operating.

*The Parkers*’ fandom presence is not as robust online as *A Different World*’s. There are only three Instagram fan pages with the first @the.parkers.fans being launched in 2019 with only 756 followers. The second @theparkershow is established in November 2020 and is currently at 197 followers. However, #TheParkers hashtag on Instagram has 24.8K posts. In comparison to #ADifferentWorld 104K tags. Before this fandom was established on Instagram, in 2011 and 2012 Tumblr fan pages for both *A Different World* and *The Parkers* are created. The differences between the two sitcoms are also seen on Tumblr. There are over 6 pages dedicated to *A Different World* and only one, entitled “Dang Mama” dedicated to *The Parkers*. It is through these digital pages that fans create a living archive of clips, photos, and gifs of the show. While *The Parkers* social media archival presence may seem slim based on its fan pages, it is alive through Instagram Black Media fan pages that operate as digital archives.

Clips of both *A Different World* and *The Parkers* are in constant rotation on Instagram accounts dedicated to nostalgia and what various accounts dub as classic Black media.

@misstorilynne is a page that releases clips from Black cast television, film, gospel

performances, and theater. @80s90sand00vibes is dedicated to Black sitcoms, movies, and music videos from the 1980s-2000 with 216K followers. @classictvandfilm with 31.5K followers focuses on archival clips from Black film and television. @ourtvclassics with 36.4K followers and @black90stvshows with 33.5K followers has a specific focus on Black cast television programs. These social media archives accounts have found a way to curate and preserve clips of Black media that are often left out of streaming platforms due to rights and curation. It is the fans of the Black cast sitcom that manage the grassroots preservation.

Despite the difference in *A Different World* and *The Parkers* reception, they are viable properties that stay in the public memory due to how they are sold for reruns. Many Black cast sitcoms did not receive the same type of rating and reception as these two college-based sitcoms, thus impacting their marketability for profit. Black media digital archive pages do the work of keeping shows alive and well in the public memory. These watermark clips often come up in social media discussions around various Black sitcoms requesting their presence on streaming platforms. It is social media preservation and fan engagement that help influence the Black cast sitcoms, showing their ability to capture niche audiences for new business for various media companies.

It is the desire for nostalgia watching that also keeps these shows alive. Streaming services focus on nostalgic programming, Netflix's turn to nostalgic original programming (Stephan, 25), is reflected in the acquisition of Black cast sitcoms. There is a unique experience in nostalgia watching of Black cast sitcoms. *A Different World* and *The Parkers* are used as shows of escape; however, the shows do not allow for one to escape from social climates built around race, class, and gender. The college experience is a space where there is learning, growing, conflict of characters and ideology. The turn to these shows in times of tense social

climate shows that it is not only a means of an escape, but a way to gain understanding of social issues and a search for solutions from the past. During Ferguson and the summer of 2020, clips of *A Different World* episode “Cats in the Cradle” where Dwayne gives a monologue condemning racism resurfaced. During the pandemic, clips of *The Parkers* episode “Dead Clown Walking” kept resurfacing dealing with comedic moments at a funeral on Black media digital archive pages and Strong Black Lead. The relevance of their content during a changing, yet familiar, social climate create fertile ground for Black cast sitcoms to thrive, survive, and be successful business models syndication and streaming.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Despite how one may personally perceive each series, each series has managed to stay accessible and in the public memory creating their own spaces in the Black cast sitcom archival canon kept alive by the fans. Black cast sitcoms are finding new life in digital fan pages that curate clips for nostalgic social media consumption. *A Different World* and *The Parkers* both benefit from digital fandom. It is the success of these two properties as means to draw in niche audiences that make them unique. Throughout their life cycle, they are utilized to launch cable channels, broadcast networks, and to draw in targeted demographics, mainly young Black audiences. With the similarity in the shows, it is their index to original broadcast, syndication, and streaming that impact their differences. However, the differences do not stop there. The style and comedic delivery around social justice issues and tough topics is also what sets the series apart. Even with this knowledge, there are still questions left for future research.

One such question is how much do college-based shows impact students’ college choices? This would require an analysis of enrollment data of HBCUs and Black students at Community Colleges around the time of *A Different World* and *The Parkers* original broadcast.



Additional future research is how the shows indexes created binary positive and negative representation language around each sitcom and examining how each series contains non-binary representation. Both shows push past binary ideas of representation of positive and negative images to show the diversity of the Black experience seeking social mobility. Finally, although the shows have thrived in syndication and streaming, how is their release on home video a reflection of the lack of DVD releases of Black cast sitcoms? *A Different World* and *The Parkers* are rich shows textually and historically for even more discourse around both series.

Black cast sitcoms have a history of rebranding and revamping a network, cable channel, and streaming service. As a niche audience, the Black audience has helped establish NBC, FOX, WB, UPN, and Viacom. The social climate of the 2020s calls for not only social awareness, representation, and escapist media to deal with the social landscape. This makes the Black cast sitcoms ripe properties for selling and consumption. Series like *A Different World* and *The Parkers* give audiences options for how to deal with Black social mobility and social awareness: lighthearted commentary or slapstick humor. By following the reception history of *A Different World* and *The Parkers*, we can see how textually similar shows' financial viability as a means of self-preservation. When Black cast sitcoms are read at their index, a holistic critical analysis of the reception of a series is created. It is the index that distinguishes shows such as *A Different World* and *The Parkers* as different even when their life cycles as series run parallel.

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