

Struggles for Equal Voice

**THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
MEDIA DEMOCRACY**

YUYA KIUCHI



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To Nichole and Noriko

and

In memory of Tsuneo

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I started my scholarly career with a small three-shelf bookcase. Fifteen five-shelf bookcases and eight plastic tubs later, I am happy and proud to complete this book. Any errors that remain in the text are solely my responsibility.

Preface

As a high school student in Tokyo, Japan, I nearly failed my history class. Approximately ten years later, I was in the final process of finishing up my doctoral dissertation—the base of this book—writing about history. A few years later, I was standing in front of more than one-hundred students at Michigan State University, giving lectures twice a week in my African American history class. A lot changed over those ten years, both personally and professionally. But a change that affected me on both those levels was my deepened understanding and appreciation of history. As a high school student, history simply meant rote learning of different names, facts, and years. It is true that this field requires much reading and remembering. No matter how much the students in my history class may complain, they still have to spend hours reading hundreds of pages, writing essays, and memorizing names and years in order to pass my class. It is a foundational part of the profession of historians. Facts and years create the sense of objectivity, an important responsibility that we have to fulfill. Without them, we would not have the basis to discuss, analyze, or explore history. Of course, this is not to say that there is singular objectivity or that an amalgamation of proper nouns makes up history. However, our day-to-day work as historians often is far from the kind of glory that other fields may have, at least in my eyes more than ten years ago.

What I learned as I pursued my career as a historian, however, is that this field can be filled with personal interests and passion about topics of study. We spend days and weeks, if not months, deciphering handwritten primary documents from decades or centuries ago. In an archive, we go through dozens of storage boxes until we finally find the one with all the information we need. We spend years typing our manuscripts in a converted home office surrounded by stacks of photocopied documents. Probably the only colors we see around us are from the covers of the books we have accumulated over

time that now seem to serve as a fort. But as we immerse ourselves in our rich history, we become increasingly filled with passion. This book is a fruit of my enthusiasm in African American History and Study, a field that is filled with African American individual and collective memories—often times erased from the mainstream academic discourse—of struggles, achievements, disappointments, rejoice, displacement, and empowerment. As historians, we can give voice to those who never had a chance to have their voice heard while alive. We also can unearth the voice of the silenced. This is where my very personal, not just professional or intellectual, passion exists.

The origin of my fascination in this field exists in my experience of awakening in 2002. During my three-year experience in Boston as an international student from Japan where racial homogeneity is so strong and pervasive that seeing a non-Japanese or non-Asian-looking person at a local supermarket could be a topic at my grandparents' dinner table, I was shocked by the intricacy of American society. In the United States, there not only were different skin colors but also different color tones. The more I familiarized myself with Boston, the more aware I became of what Washington Street signified in the mind of many Bostonians. "Things could be rough on the south side of Washington Street. You don't want to go there after dark," one of the administration workers at my undergraduate institution once told me. This is when my rosy idea about American diversity and pluralism began to subside and take on a different meaning in my life. Except for one year I spent in France, I had spent twenty-one years of my life in Japan. I believed that the United States was a true melting pot where racism was a thing of the past and skin color no longer mattered. As much as it sounds like a cliché, that was what I believed before my arrival in the United States. I was only ten years old when Rodney King was beaten by Los Angeles police officers. I was eleven when the controversy around Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas took place. I was fifteen during the O. J. Simpson murder trial. More importantly, I was on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. For a high school student, I was relatively familiar with current affairs. But I knew little about what was happening more than six thousand miles away. So when I arrived in the United States and was confronted with reality, I had many questions. What does diversity mean? What is pluralism? What does it mean to coexist? What is race? Without much knowledge about or firsthand experience with the other side of Washington Street, my curiosity grew. Out of that curiosity came a reason to conduct an academic investigation through which I learned the role of cable television as inter- and intracommunity building and as a tool of empowerment in Boston's African American communities.

Pursuing my academic career in Michigan was an optimal opportunity to continue my project. About an hour away from Detroit, which once was known as “arsenal of democracy” and “Detroit the Dynamite,” but is now as an epitome of perceived urban decay, I also witnessed the reflection, or perhaps the essence of American social intricacy about the popular myth. As I finished my doctoral work and started my career as an assistant professor at Michigan State University, the U.S. economy plummeted. I would hear from my family members and friends from Japan talking about how Japanese news media showed the General Motor’s headquarters building in Detroit, as well as abandoned neighborhoods not even a mile away from it. The powerful message that Chrysler’s “Imported from Detroit” television commercial possessed when it premiered in February 2011 is seldom shared in Japan. It is clear, however, that no matter on which side of the Pacific Ocean people might live, they are well aware, probably only subconsciously, of America’s perpetuating dilemma. On the one hand is a country whose social progress is represented by the election of President Obama. On the other hand is continuing struggles of African Americans. The longer I lived and experienced American society, the more questions I had.

Although we must acknowledge achievements of past community leaders, we should not forget that the United States is not colorblind. As I discussed with colleagues and panelists at the National Council for Black Studies meeting in 2010, the myth of colorblindness is pervasive. Just because a Harvard-educated African American made it to the White House or some African American popular culture icons can afford to live an upper-class lifestyle does not mean the majority of African Americans live in the same conditions. The National Urban League’s annual publication eloquently reveals the truth of American racial politics. The reality that many Americans choose to ignore or deny continues to afflict many African Americans. Their ignorance and denial in many cases make social conditions less ideal for many Blacks.

As any writer of a scholarly book wishes, I hope that this volume will be widely read in classrooms. My hope is particularly strong because I have talked with many undergraduate students from within and outside my classes and realized that many of them blindly believed in the myth of colorblindness and of a post-racial society. “I’m not a racist, because my best friend is Black,” “My high school was very diverse. So I’m not a racist,” “I can make racial jokes because I don’t really mean it,” and many other statements are innocently uttered. Teaching freshmen writing classes with a particular focus on race and ethnicity was a moment of revelation. Students who willingly admit they have lacked personal experiences with African

Americans or other racial or nonracial minorities claim very confidently that the minorities are in much better situations than the nonminorities. The ideas of institutional racism, tacit discrimination, systemic and structural racism, and so on, slip their mind.

But I do not intend to blame these young students only in their late teens and early twenties. Their parents, family members, teachers, neighbors, and many others have repeatedly told them that the United States has become colorblind. In a country where national pride and patriotism are so cherished, erasure of historical memories and denial are convenient tools. This is why this academic study should be treated not only as a descriptive and corrective work, but also as a prescriptive work. As past African American leaders have helped American racial awareness move from racism and animosity to racial ambivalence, the effort must be continued toward racial comity. My hope is that this work will contribute to this African American intellectual tradition.

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Introduction

Unveiling the Struggles for Equal Voice

The history of the relationship between African Americans and the cable television industry is complex and intriguing. Although Black Entertainment Television empowered many African Americans through its establishment in January 1980 and its listing on the New York Stock Exchange in 1991 as the first Black-owned corporation, many felt betrayed when its founder, Robert Johnson, sold the company to a white-owned major media conglomerate, Viacom, in 2003. Exploring the experience of African Americans with cable television systems unearths the development and under-examined history of their struggles for equal voice, or of the Black image in the Black mind.¹ In other words, the question is how to publicly share the images of African Americans as seen by themselves, not seen or imagined by whites, who have historically owned the means of image production in the mainstream and broadcasting media. In the idea of public access and cable television as the property of local communities and residents, a significant group of African Americans believed that communications technology would bring social and community justice and equality across color lines. Although such optimism has yet to materialize even to this day, many African Americans hoped that cable television would empower their neighbors. This new kind of televisual image production and consumption provided African Americans of the post-Civil Rights era, who had been disproportionately left unnoticed, erased, silenced, or marginalized in the broadcasting media, with the locus and opportunity to produce their own collective and communal memory, to realize self-representation, and to create a sense of community membership. Cable television was a vehicle of community justice for many African Americans in the second half of the twentieth century. Employing a comparative analysis using Boston, Massachusetts, and Detroit, Michigan

as case studies, this book argues that since the early 1970s African Americans in both cities possessed and exercised political and social agency and influenced the decision-making processes in their respective municipalities. These cities experienced many of the demographic and political changes many other urban areas underwent: the rise of ethnic communities, socio-economic domination by the white population while their Black counterparts tried to obtain their agency, economic instability, and so on. By using cable television, both as a concept and as a technical means, they raised their self-esteem through empowerment, strengthened community ties, and reversed the negative images of African Americans that the media had disseminated in visual media-dependent American society.

The scholarly trend of examining network television and major movies and not focusing on narrowcasting visual culture such as cable television makes this study particularly important. In mainstream media industries, African Americans had little presence as producers. Production for Hollywood and network television that increasingly became popular in the mid-twentieth century required financial capital, technical and specialized education and training, equipment, and other resources to which very few African Americans had access. As a result, even as African Americans appeared more on movie and television screens in the mid-century, the images of African Americans on television often were simply reflections of the preexisting Black stereotypes in white minds.

In the film industry, especially during the 1970s, blaxploitation films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Super Fly* (1972), and *Blazing Saddles* (1974) embodied very subtle but enduring racism after the Civil Rights era. The 1980s and 1990s continued to witness numerous film representations of distorted Blackness. *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992) and other situation comedies, as well as the monumental series *Roots* (1977) and other more documentary-like shows, continued to portray African American images that were considered safe for white audiences. Although both film and television industries often depended on the disposable income of African Americans as a major source of their revenue, whites dominated the production part of the content and aimed to satisfy the white audience. J. Fred MacDonald explains that although television promised its African American audience to “[overcome] hatred, fear, suspicion, and hostility,” the reality was “the tale of persistent stereotyping, reluctance to develop or star Black talent, and exclusion of minorities from the production side of the industry.”² Similarly, Donald Bogle reminisces that during his childhood “[he] was aware, as was most of Black America, of a fundamental racism or a misinterpretation of African American life that underlay much of what

appeared on the tube.”³ Although Martin Luther King Jr. and a few other activists used network television as a political tool, such attempts were rather limited in the 1960s.

The development of cable television systems took place in this historical and social context. The Civil Rights era did not revolutionize the media industry. The relationship between media and African Americans was one way. In other words, serving as the masters’ tool, media did not inherently serve for the interests for African Americans and other minority groups. Those who had been underrepresented and underserved, if not unrepresented and unserved, had to reconfigure the medium of their interest so that it could work for their benefit. The increasing concerns about distorted representations of African Americans that African American leaders and intellectuals shared coincided with the augmenting interests in and attention to cable television as a separate communication medium from television. The new technology seemed to have its own strengths and potential to materialize the promise “that television [was] free of racial barriers.”⁴ Unlike the industries with which African Americans experienced difficulty accessing the production side of the media, the new industry had the appeal of allowing African Americans to be a part of content production once the cable system was introduced to their community. Such an effort was their strategy to use cable television as a tool for social change during the time when many African Americans continued to be disappointed with the distorted images of themselves on television and struggled against geographic, psychological, occupational, and emotional segregation.

Theories from African American Studies serve as useful platforms for examining the history of African American involvement in the cable industry. The idea of “the Black image in the Black mind” embodies the continuum that connects the existing historiography in African American Studies and modern mass communication technology. In 1971, George M. Frederickson published his seminal study titled *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914*. In 2000, Mia Bay wrote *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830–1925*. In the same year, Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki published *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*.⁵ These scholars analyze dimensions of Black life through the lens of what W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness.”⁶ As these scholars untangled the binary between Black identity and “American identity,” this study also attempts to understand this intricate history of the African American experience. The dualistic idea promoted by Du Bois and others still endures and serves as a fundamental framework in African