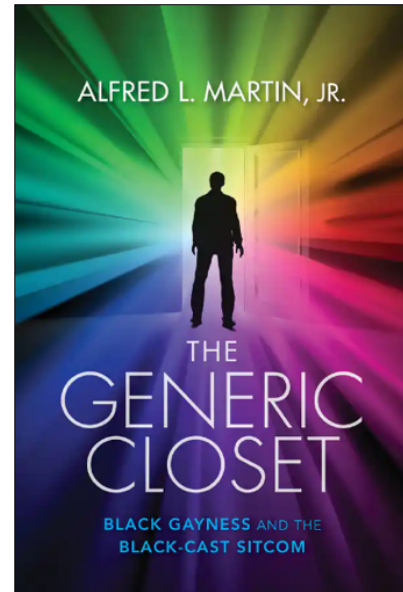


Alfred L. Martin Jr., **The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom**, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021, 242 pp., \$80.00 (hardcover), \$25.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Aiden James Kosciesza  
Temple University, USA

The so-called Gay '90s were lauded by news media as an era of blossoming gay and lesbian representation on American television, but the exemplars of this shift shared one commonality: Whiteness. Although White gay and lesbian characters on shows with White casts and White target audiences enjoyed increasingly complex and nuanced representation in the 1990s, Black gay characters on Black-cast shows remained few and flat. In ***The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom***, Alfred L. Martin Jr. embarks on a detailed case study of five U.S. shows that aired between 1996 and 2014 and outlines the circumscribed roles available to Black gay characters. Martin unpacks the television industry's imagination of Black audiences as monolithically intolerant of homosexuality, traces the implications of these industrial assumptions from the writers' room to the screen, and concludes with the voices of Black gay viewers themselves.



At the center of the author's work is the titular "generic closet" that constrains Black gay characters who appear in the Black-cast sitcom genre. Their stories are boxed into a three-act structure of "the three Ds—detection, discovery/declaration, and discarding" (p. 70) that reduces Black gay characters to objects of knowledge who can be investigated, confronted, and finally dismissed by straight characters. In contrast to gay and lesbian characters on White and multiracial shows of the same period, Black gay characters on Black-cast sitcoms are swept under the rug (and off the show) after the revelation of their sexuality. Through a multimodal analysis that considers both industrial practices and audience reception, Martin convincingly demonstrates the objectification and subsequent discarding of Black gay characters that forms the generic closet.

Martin's three-pronged use of production-side interviews, textual analysis, and audience interviews—what he terms a "*circuit of media study* approach" (emphasis in original; p. 4)—is a key strength of the book. Multimodal studies like this one are a highlight of the media and communication field, and they present an opportunity for learning and methodological innovation in other disciplines (Kumar & Parameswaran, 2018). Chapter 1 centers the production context for Black-cast sitcoms and explains how the U.S. television industry's imagination of Black audiences as antigay, coupled with the precarity of Black-cast television production, left little room for risk-taking in representations of Black gayness. During the 1990s, start-up networks UPN and TBS cynically used Black-cast shows to attract Black audiences and boost their ratings, then jettisoned the Black-cast shows in a bid for more "universal" (read: Whiter) appeal. This created a production environment in which producers of Black-cast shows hewed closely to the industrial imagination of the intolerant Black audience, building a generic closet around Black gay characters even as lesbian and gay characters on White-cast and multiracial shows enjoyed greater representational freedom. Crucially, as Martin emphasizes, this tiptoeing

around the purported sensibilities of Black audiences was not based on any kind of market research, but instead relied on stereotypes that conflated Blackness with commodified hip-hop culture. In other words, Black gay characters were relegated to the generic closet not because Black audiences *were* intolerant, but because they were *imagined* to be.

In chapter 2, Martin turns from the political economy of the 1990s and early 2000s Black-cast sitcom to the specific production context of five shows that did include Black gay characters: *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us*, *Are We There Yet?*, and *Let's Stay Together* (p. 18). Martin interviewed writers and showrunners and found that the generic closet's three-Ds formula functioned as a template that allowed Black gay characters into these five sitcoms, but only as a puzzle or an issue to be solved, at which point they exited the show for good. While some pushed back against stereotypical depictions of gayness or wished to see characters continue on in the show, the writers and showrunners had limited agency to disrupt the industrially produced generic closet. Interviewees described tensions between representing gayness in ways that would not offend public LGBTQ+ media watchdogs like GLAAD but that also would not alienate the Black audience—which, again, was imagined as antigay. The episodes Martin analyzed “deploy[ed] gayness as a means to a heteronormative end” (p. 82): to construct gayness as detectable through mannerisms or clothing choices, to enforce the public declaration of gayness for straight people's benefit, to provide a contrast to (and thus reinforcement of) hegemonic Black masculinity, and to demonstrate the “coolness” of the recurring cast through their tolerance of the gay character.

Chapter 3 pivots to textual analysis of the episodes in question and specifically to the laugh track, a feature of the sitcom genre that Martin considers both ideological and political. Martin argues that all laugh tracks must be read as elements of postproduction, because even sitcoms shot before a live audience can and do edit, manipulate, add, subtract, and reconstitute laughter and other reaction noises to fit the producers' aims. Thus, the laugh track (re)produces hegemonies by signaling, from a production standpoint, what is funny and what is not. In the Black-cast sitcoms Martin analyzed, the laugh track constructed Black gay characters as the object of humor and Black homosexuality as absurd within the shows' narrative universes. The community created by the laugh track excluded Black gay people and policed the boundaries of Black masculinity, demonstrating through constructed collective humor what was or was not acceptable. The placement of laughter also reinforced a politics of respectability in which more homonormative gay characters were accepted while more flamboyant gay characters were ridiculed.

Martin's fourth chapter brings in audience reception through an interview study with 20 self-identified Black gay men. Martin's interviewees confirmed elements of his textual analysis, noting the service role played by Black gay characters, who seemingly existed within the series only to make the heterosexual characters look “hip” and accepting; the reification of the notion of “gaydar,” or reliable detection of homosexuality by heterosexuals; and the involuntary coming-out narratives of the Black gay characters, who were compelled to declare their homosexuality for the comfort of straight characters. Crucially, the interviewees could think of numerous ways for the Black gay characters to feature in ongoing storylines on the shows. This contrasts with the writers and showrunners Martin interviewed, who considered the characters' storylines complete. This final chapter and the conclusion provide the capstone for Martin's argument that the three-act, three-D structure decenters Black gayness on Black-cast sitcoms and traps it in the generic closet.

While Martin's prose is eloquent and readable and will be enjoyed by both students and media scholars, the chapter organization may confuse readers unfamiliar with the sitcoms. The helpful recounting of episode plots and characters that Martin includes in chapter 3 would have been better positioned ahead of chapter 2, which references the episodes without providing the context. Since the analysis in chapter 3 does not depend on chapter 2, an unfamiliar reader may be better served by reading chapter 3 first. While these earlier chapters would benefit from more explanatory context, the fourth chapter, on audience reception, is missing some analytical context. Martin's present-day interviewees were asked to watch the 1996–2014 sitcom episodes for this project but might never have watched the shows during their broadcast period. While Martin makes a compelling case for his focus specifically on Black gay audiences, he does not engage with his interviewees' historical positioning relative to the texts. This seems a missed opportunity, particularly given Martin's acknowledgment that some of these texts are currently inaccessible to the general public (p. xi).

Martin's work is timely given the present climate of growing awareness of structural racism, especially in the United States. This book also underscores the need for intersectional analysis, highlighting the disparate conditions of representation for White gay characters and Black gay characters during the so-called Gay '90s and the problematic depiction of the "coming out" narrative as universal to the LGBTQ+ experience, despite studies showing that it is less salient to the Black LGBTQ+ experience (p. 14). An eloquent companion piece for Martin's book is Maryann Erigha's (2019) *The Hollywood Jim Crow*, which details industrial practices that limit opportunities for Black actors, directors, and writers within the U.S. film industry. Like the television producers Martin describes, who imagine Black audiences as homophobic and thus limit the roles available for Black gay characters on the Black-cast sitcom, Erigha reveals that Hollywood producers label Black-cast or Black-directed films as "unbankable," or unlikely to make a profit, and therefore unworthy of top-tier budgets, resources, or promotion (Erigha, 2019, p. 55). Together, these texts paint a stark portrait of industrial racism in U.S. entertainment media, on both the big and the small screen.

### References

- Erigha, M. (2019). *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The racial politics of the movie industry*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kumar, S., & Parameswaran, R. (2018). Charting an itinerary for postcolonial communication and media studies. *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 347–358. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx025>