

Alfred L. Martin Jr., **Fandom for Us by Us: The Pleasures and Practices of Black Audiences**, New York: NYU Press, 2025, 200 pp., \$89.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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Fandom for Us by Us: The Pleasures and Practices of

Black Audiences by Alfred L. Martin Jr. centers on Black fans within fandom studies to address the dearth of inquiry into Black fans and fandom. Martin’s Blackness and feminism position him as what sociologist and feminist scholar Hill Collins (1986) calls the “outsider within,” as he shares participants’ aspirations for expanded and quality Black media representation and production while also standing apart as a scholar seeking to amplify and expand the scholarship on Black fandom and fans (p. 14). Martin’s standpoint puts participants at ease while making him mindful of the importance of capturing Black voices and fandom practices. Martin, an Associate Professor and the Department Chairperson for Cinematic Arts at the University of Miami, has extensively researched Blackness and race and comedy, Black fandom, and Black gayness in comedy. This volume is part of New York University’s interdisciplinary Postmillennial Pop Series, a text set designed to explore how popular culture expands the political imagination of diverse global audiences.



Martin’s analysis is guided by his Four C theory of Black fandom, specifically: (1) Class, as exemplified by how Blackness, visibility, and high art culture converge in Black fandom for Misty Copeland’s ballet performances (p. 14); (2) Clout, which manifests when Black audiences deploy their fandom and consumer power to support and advocate for Black-cast productions like *Black Panther* and diverse media futures (p. 58); (3) Canon, denoting texts centered on Black affect, that are shared intergenerationally, and that become retextualized, such as the musical film *The Wiz* (p. 124); and, (4) Comfort, derived when Black audiences make nostalgic and sentimental associations and feel joy and less anxiety in response to the TV series *The Golden Girls* (pp. 133–134). The Four Cs are not mutually exclusive, as they reinforce and extend each other. Martin cites Black fans’ voices that inform his theory, noting, “I do this to ensure [. . .] that these Black folks do not appear as data points whose individual knowledges were extracted for my scholarly gain” (p. 15). Martin’s practice reflects the ethos of grounded theory, specifically in envisioning his subjects as active, not passive, collaborative participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Chapter 1 frames Black fandom for African American prima ballerina Misty Copeland’s American Ballet Theatre (ABT) performances through Martin’s lens of class. Martin, a dancer with knowledge of the Eurocentric ballet world, conducted in-depth phone interviews and observed Black fans at performances. Many Black Copeland fans discovered her through media coverage of her success in the ultra-White ballet world rather than through the ABT. Class denotes Black Copeland fans’ higher economic status and the legacy of Black elites such as Boston’s Black Brahmin women who sought to bring Black artistry to integrated audiences in the early 1900s (Fleming & Roses, 2007). Such efforts privileged high culture over low or

popular culture a distinction in alignment with Arnold's (2006) championing of true culture as "the love of perfection" (p. 34). Class also identifies how Black fans' efforts decenter ballet's Whiteness in their evaluation of Copeland's performances affectively, not technically, and by speaking their feedback in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Martin uses AAVE to put his participants at ease, and likewise, Inniss-Thompson et al. (2024) find that affirming young Black women's authentic communication is central to their psychological safety.

The White-coded ballet world mirrors the Whiteness of fandom studies. Martin and Griffin (2024) argue that fan studies either ignore race or have "ghettoized" race research into specialty sections, that deem White fans and fandom as the "exnominated and normative" standard (para. 2). Martin's chapter 2 highlights Black fans' clout, their influence, and power, as media consumers of *Black Panther*. Martin cites how Black fan action (1950s–1970s) helped to curtail series like *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah* (p. 62), largely considered to be televisual "minstrelsy" (Gates Jr. cited in Riggs, 1992), and to realize the all-Black cast, near-\$24 million budget film musical *The Wiz*. Martin also aligns Black clout with the creation of new Black role models and with "Afrofuturism," a future imagined by Black people, characterized by social justice, and possessing a culture with both ancient African and technological elements (Keeling, 2019). Emphasizing Black clout, one could argue, places the onus on the Black community with fixing Hollywood racism; however, clout ultimately provides the agency for Black fans to shape Black futures rather than just accepting White-centric scripts of Blackness.

Studying Martin's peers, the Potluck Crew, and social media, chapter 3 considers *The Wiz* as a Black canonical text. Martin argues that communal canon formation values emotional resonance over aesthetics, Black feeling, intergenerational meaning, and retextualization. This emphasis on feeling over finances captures cultural differences often missed in fan studies, while Martin's "outsider within" status yields rich data born of trust. Critics might challenge the Potluck Crew's limits as a source of data, but Martin extends his research to TikTok users engaging in "participatory" or "remix culture" (Mannell & Smith, 2022). This credits the remixing of media clips by Black social media fans as creation and not just the formal creative work of White director Sidney Lumet. Ultimately, Martin clarifies at the outset, "the work [. . .] is extrapolatable across Black fandoms, but it is not my claim that I am uncovering universal 'Black fandom' (as if such a thing were possible)" (p. 5).

While the 1980s White-cast sitcom *The Golden Girls* (*TGG*) seems an unlikely text for Martin's final chapter on comfort, he reminds readers that "Black fandom is not necessarily about representation mattering, but about the matter of resonance" (p. 164). Differentiating this from earlier chapters' emphasis on visibility, Martin uses *TGG* to illustrate a "politics of resonance" where Black fans can "feel seen" by a text without literally "being seen" in its images (p. 128). Interviewed fans highlighted *TGG*'s "thematic representation," which allowed them to see themselves in the characters despite sociocultural differences. Notably, Martin is the coauthor of essays analyzing the cultural impact of *TGG* from different cultural standpoints (Miller & Martin, 2025). While acknowledging the criticism that embracing White-cast media might prioritize Black joy over real pain, the chapter emphasizes the active resilience of Black fans whose media dexterity enables connections to culturally dissimilar texts. Martin clarifies early on that he is not attempting to "(re)pathologize fans" by investigating their choices (p. 10); instead, asking "why" reveals what Black fan labor produces and what fans gain from their texts.

Martin's book, organized to illustrate his Four C theoretical framework, expands the knowledge base on Black fans and fandom in meaningful ways that center Blackness and respects the power of Black fans' labor while not casting them as a static amalgam. Martin's model could potentially be applied and expanded in its application to other marginalized fan communities (e.g., Latinx and Asian American). Martin approaches his participants relationally in ways that demonstrate sensitivity and understanding of how Black fans' voices have previously been erased, co-opted, subverted, pathologized, datafied, and dehumanized. Similarly, Martin appreciates how Black fans make meaning and claim discursive space in digital communities. Undergraduates, graduate students, and scholars in Black studies, communication studies, critical cultural studies, dance and performance studies, digital humanities, fan studies, and screen media will appreciate Martin's intellectual curiosity and the personal voice that he uses to engage the reader. Martin frames his book as a "love letter to Blackness" (p. 173). This is evident in his recognition of foundational scholarship by Robin R. Means-Coleman, Jacqueline Bobo, Kara Keeling, Rebecca Wanzo and others; in the bonds of trust that he forges with his participants; in the thankfulness he shows for Black fans' labor; and with the seriousness that he treats his responsibility as a researcher to create work that advances Black fans and fandom as a fertile field deserving of further research. In this, he succeeds.

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