

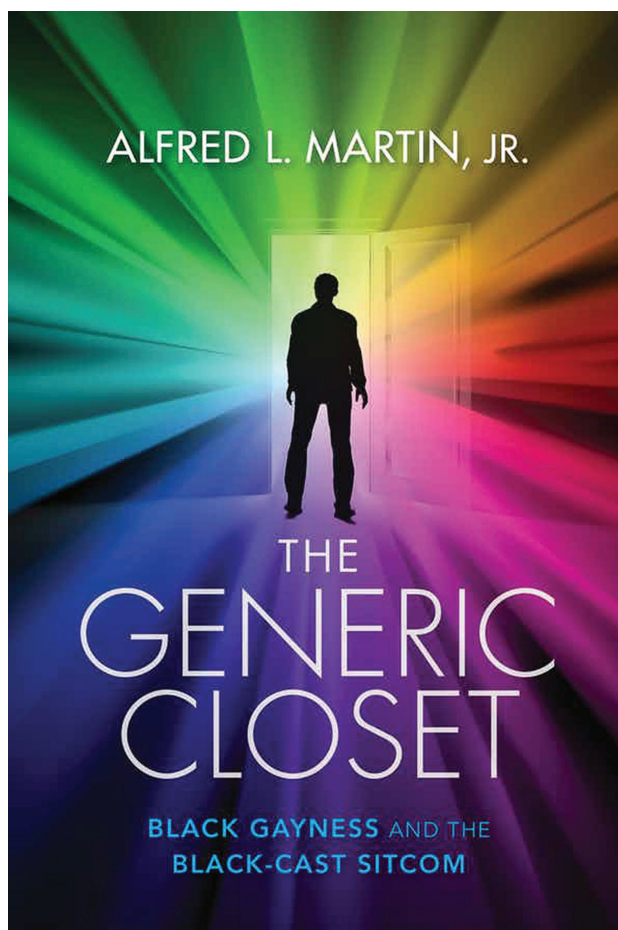
Book Review:

Martin, Alfred L., Jr. *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021)

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In *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom*,² Alfred L. Martin Jr. constructs a rigorous, persuasive account of the historical inclusion of Black gay characters in Black-led sitcoms. Zeroing in on the period in the 1990s and 2000s when, in US television, a significant increase in on-screen Black and gay representation occurred, Martin uses interviews with audiences and industry professionals to produce nuanced understandings of the industrial moment itself, the programs created during it, and, most centrally to the monograph's arc, Black gayness as it appeared in Black-cast sitcoms. Throughout the book, he explores “not only how Black gayness has been mediated but also why it has been mediated in the ways it has.”³ Through his analysis, Martin compellingly argues that ideologies produced about Black gayness foreclosed upon potentially expansive and innovative representational possibilities within the genre; these limiting ideologies were reinforced through the storytelling decisions that were ultimately made.

Building on insights from scholars across multiple fields and sub-fields, Martin analyzes “systems of power that produce ideologies about Black gayness and the relationship of knowledge production to Black gay audience reception, comedy, and Black masculinity.”⁴ His multimodal methodological approach capitalizes on the range of influences: using Julie D’Acci’s circuit of media study approach⁵ to focus in on Blackness and Black gayness, he incorporates a Caldwellian production cultures-informed analytical frame nuanced by a queer of color analytical frame from Roderick A. Ferguson while also staying attuned to genre and audiences. Although *The Generic Closet* is predominantly a contribution to the fields of television studies and media industries studies, Martin layers in theoretically grounded ideas about queer aesthetics and identity production throughout. His analysis of power ultimately makes visible how Black gayness has been operationalized in Black-cast sitcoms through recurring, delicate balancing acts between creative investment in authentic storytelling and industrial norms and expectations around Blackness, queerness, and the intersections therein.

The study’s primary theoretical intervention, the generic closet, stems in part from limitations that Martin identifies with the conception of the closet, which he asserts productively attends to “queer knowledge production in a heteronormative culture” but is a “decidedly white concept” and as such is not particularly well-suited to center considerations of non-white queerness.⁶ He ultimately offers, through engagement with Jason Mittell’s broadened framing of genre—which goes beyond texts themselves to incorporate overlapping interrelations between texts and audiences, industries, historical, and social contexts—the notion of the *generic* closet. In a departure from the de facto perspective that proliferates across US TV industries, Martin posits that the generic closet is “concerned first and foremost with the industrial imagination of Black audiences” and “structures Black gay narrative development within the Black-cast sitcom.”⁷ He situates this theorization through engagement with and expansion upon Lynne Joyrich’s “three Ds” (detection, discovery/declaration, and discarding), which she put forth as a way to classify televisual engagement with white gayness.⁸ Additionally, he cites Todd Gitlin’s illustrative analysis of US TV industries in the 1980s, preceding studies of Black audiences by Jacqueline Bobo, Robin R. Means Coleman, Rebecca Wanzo, and Kristen Warner, as well as earlier studies of white gay male audiences conducted by scholars including Michael DeAngelis, Richard Dyer, and Larry Gross.

The Generic Closet is comprised of four chapters (accompanied by both an introduction and a conclusion) that range in scope to include historical, cultural, industrial, and reception analyses. Chapter 1, entitled “Building and Rebuilding Generic Closets within the Black-Cast Sitcom Industry,” considers the role of industrial considerations around production and distribution specifically as they relate to the historical trajectory of Blackness and Black-cast sitcoms on television. By analyzing the histories of UPN, TBS, and BET—three television channels that emerged in the 1980s–1990s and at least partially established their brands through investments in Black-cast programming—with particular attention to the frames of Blackness and Black gayness, Martin argues that the “Black-cast sitcom creates and recreates the generic closet—not necessarily because of some innate antigayness [on the part of Black creators, writers, and audiences] but because of the precarity of Black television production.”⁹

Through his industries-centered perspective, he points to two key ideas that provide a base for the rest of his chapters: first, he illustrates the ways in which perceptions held

by industry professionals can solidify into something taken as commonsense knowledge. In this case, industry professionals' beliefs about Black audiences harboring homophobic viewpoints limited the networks' willingness to portray Black gay characters in Black-cast sitcoms. The other foundational idea offered in the first chapter centers the conditions around production and distribution opportunities for Black-cast programming, emphasizing that the heightened precarity of these shows—illustrated through quotes, interviews, and discursive analysis—when compared with white-led programs constructed precarity as “an organizing logic” for Black-cast sitcoms.¹⁰ These two points, taken together, render visible the industrial process of constructing and reconstructing the generic closet: industry lore about Black audience preferences combined with conditions of precarity resulted in the repeated foreclosure upon Black gay representation within the genre.

The second chapter complements Martin's broader historical and discursive analysis with production studies-driven analysis centering interviews with television showrunners and writers working on Black-cast sitcoms. Providing access to agential decision-making processes productively counter-balances and texturizes Martin's preceding focus on systemic inhibiting factors. Through his interviews with five writers and four showrunners, he highlights how much negotiation can occur within writers' rooms before episodes even reach the review stage with network and cable distribution partners, and, in turn, how efforts toward authentic and meaningful storytelling can look different for different people working on the same creative team. Additionally, although he asserts that he believes everyone he included in the book was “well-meaning,”¹¹ he identifies a trend toward writers and showrunners incorporating Black gayness predominantly for its “narrative utility”¹² for the other characters and their storylines.

The third chapter, “Comedy, Laughter, and the Generic Closet,” turns the prism on the generic closet again, this time considering genre, specifically comedy and its use of the laugh track, as related to containment practices maintained by the generic closet. Martin argues that often Black gay characters were contained to comedic positions that encourage laughing at and sidelining Black gayness in favor of representations more closely aligned with “(hetero)normative Blackness.”¹³ The fourth chapter offers the final shift in perspective, moving toward subjectivity through interviews with 20 self-identified Black gay men about their engagement with Black gay representation in Black-cast sitcoms. Taking care to articulate his methodology, Martin explores many of the ideas of his earlier chapters in conversation with them, ultimately building toward a discussion of how Black gay men would feel more completely represented by on-screen depictions. Moves to provide biographical information, retain colloquialisms in quotations, and acquire insight about subjective imaginings from Black gay men about what could exist on TV outside of the generic closet coalesce to keep an eye toward the opinions, experiences, and humanity of those men.

Martin's dynamic analytical frame throughout the book maintains steady attention on Blackness and Black gayness because of its inherent flexibility. By homing in on both macro- and micro-industrial details, audience perspectives, and storylines themselves, Martin never loses sight of the dynamism of Black gayness and the interplay of ideological, structural, and interpersonal constructions of it. He builds a sturdy, adaptable, and replicable way of rendering visible a phenomenon of containment that has been historically erased through

the calcification of longstanding industrial practices. This study cuts to the core of intersecting concerns around identity, representation, and television by focusing on Blackness and Black gayness. Martin's extensive interviews with creatives and audience members are bright spots that affirm, yet again, that the goal of this project is tied to understanding the ideological power of media industries (and the people working within them) while pushing beyond conversations that end at representation itself. The interviews also enliven Martin's analysis of industrial structures with attention to their human elements without losing sight of the import of those larger structures. Further, Martin expands and enriches this subfield by centering members of intersecting minoritized identity groups throughout his study.

Notably, throughout *The Generic Closet*, Martin holds space for the positive and productive aspects of representations of Black gay characters, even while highlighting areas worthy of critique. This tension is something many scholars studying media industries (while also attending to implications of race, sexual identity, and other minoritized identity categories within those industries) are required to balance: while there is willingness, and even desire, to acknowledge advancements around diversity, engaging with the potential of *what could be* can make it difficult to maintain a critical lens toward understanding which elements have limited or continue to limit possibilities around more authentic, dynamic representations of minoritized groups. Martin successfully strikes this balance through careful deployment of his multifaceted analytical approach, the facets of which are ultimately unified by his illumination of the previously obfuscated generic closet and the revelation of how it functions to uphold boundaries around Black gay inclusion in US television.

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² Alfred L. Martin Jr. (2021), *The generic closet: Black gayness and the Black-cast sitcom*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Julie D'Acci (2004), Cultural studies, television studies, and the crisis in the humanities. In Lynn Spigel & Jan Olsson (Eds.), *Television after TV: Essays on a medium in transition* (pp. 418–446). Durham: Duke University Press.

⁶ Martin, *The generic closet*, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ Lynne Joyrich (2009), Epistemology of the console. In Glyn Davis & Gary Needham (Eds.), *Queer TV: Theories, historic, politics* (pp. 15–47). New York: Routledge.

⁹ Martin, *The generic closet*, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹² *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.