Book Review:

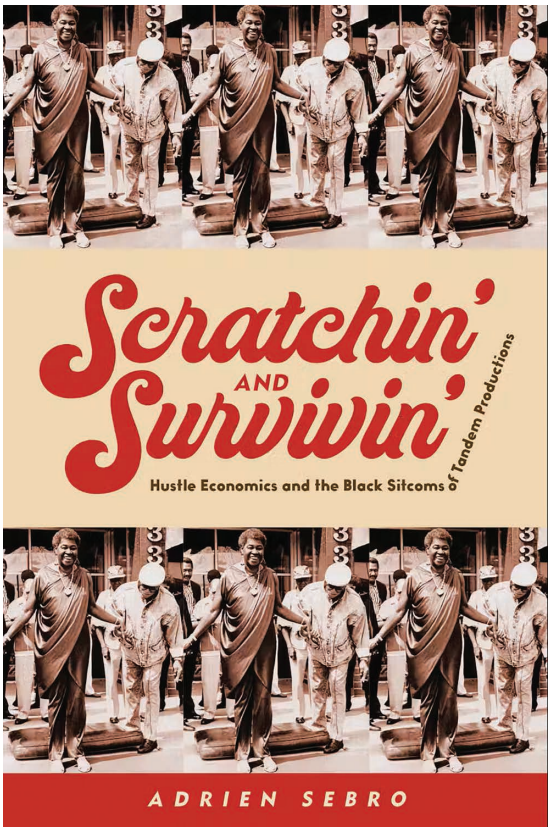
Sebro, Adrien. *Scratchin' and Survivin': Hustle Economics and the Black Sitcoms of Tandem Productions.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023)

Phill Harrold
GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY
pharrold2@student.gsu.edu

Keywords: *Black Television*, *Media Industries*

Adrien Sebro's *Scratchin' and Survivin'* makes a welcome and incisive contribution to the growing body of work that links media industry studies with Black media historiography, performance studies, and television studies. Focusing on three formative 1970s sitcoms as follows, *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*, Sebro examines how Black artists navigated the industrial politics of network-era television and asserted their creative agency within racially constrained production structures. What emerges is a compelling portrait of "hustle economics," Sebro's term for the improvisatory, affective, and labor-intensive modes of survival and authorship developed by Black creatives under industrial conditions designed to marginalize them.

Sebro's central methodological intervention is his reorientation of industrial analysis toward the labor and dissent of Black writers, performers, and producers. Drawing on extensive archival research, which includes the Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin papers, production notes, and viewer correspondence, Sebro foregrounds the role of improvisation, on- and off-screen dissent, and institutional negotiation. This approach expands the scope of production studies by revealing how Black artists participated in the authorship of primetime television, even when excluded from formal credit or above-the-line roles.



Scratchin' and Survivin' is firmly situated within the interdisciplinary tradition of critical media industry studies, building upon the work of scholars such as Herman Gray, Kristen Warner, Miranda Banks, and John Caldwell. Sebro positions the 1970s network sitcom as a key site for understanding how Black cultural labor was negotiated and disciplined during a period of industrial transition and racial retrenchment. Rather than reading *Good Times* or *The Jeffersons* as merely liberal representations of racial issues or as examples of "positive" visibility, Sebro situates these texts within what Sherry Ortner might call the "deep texts" and "reflexive rituals" of production culture. His focus on dissent, particularly in the cases of Redd Foxx and Esther Rolle, highlights how Black performers resisted and reframed the terms of their participation within constrained industrial logics.

Sebro's chapter on gender and performance in *Good Times* is especially strong, revealing how Rolle's off-screen advocacy for Black maternal representation shaped the show's creative direction and challenged both executive control and audience expectations. Similarly, his reading of *The Jeffersons* refuses to treat wealth or visibility as uncomplicated signs of progress, instead framing George Jefferson's narrative as emblematic of "racialized mobility" and the limits of sitcom legibility. These case studies do important work in recontextualizing often-dismissed shows within broader histories of Black television labor and dissent.

The concept of "hustle economics" is a generative addition to the field, bridging textual, industrial, and performance analysis. It describes not only the thematic content of these sitcoms but also the lived experiences of their creators. These are conditions shaped by systemic exclusion, improvisation, and uneven access to power. Sebro's framing here recalls Caldwell's call to consider production cultures as sites of affective labor and micropolitics. Hustling, in Sebro's account, becomes both an aesthetic mode and a labor strategy, revealing how racialized performance and production are deeply intertwined.

If there is a limitation to Sebro's study, it lies in the narrow industrial scope of the project. Focused almost exclusively on the shows of Tandem Productions, *Scratchin' and Survivin'* might have benefited from a broader comparative frame–considering, for example, the rise of *What's Happening!!* or later syndication models of the 1980s to trace how "hustle economics" evolved across different industrial contexts. Nonetheless, the book's depth of archival engagement and clarity of argument more than justify its focused scope.

Scratchin' and Survivin' should be required reading for scholars of media industries, television history, and Black media studies. It models an interdisciplinary approach that refuses

to treat labor, aesthetics, and ideology as discrete domains. In so doing, it reminds us that television history must be told not only through programming trends or network strategies but through the embodied, contested, and often precarious labor of those who made it.

Author Biography

Phill Harrold is a PhD student in Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University and a part-time Assistant Professor of English at Kennesaw State University. His research interests include race and the representation of African Americans in speculative cinema, the Black audience, and film music. As a scholar who champions social justice, Phill has taught undergraduate courses in Cultural Diversity, Social Issues and Technology, Literature, Composition, Humanities and Contemporary Popular Culture, and Speech. Before beginning his doctoral studies, Phill was a creative director, a speculative screenwriter, and a Navy veteran.