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Dangerous Fictions: Race, History, and *King*

by JENNIFER FULLER

Abstract: This essay analyzes discourses around the controversial docudrama *King* (NBC, 1978), which portrayed Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. A look at mainstream and black press coverage of the controversies surrounding *King* shows that the meaning of “history” and perceptions of why it mattered differed greatly along racial lines.

In February 1978, NBC aired *King*, a six-hour miniseries on the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement. *King* was an expensive and heavily promoted production, with Oscar-nominated stars and an Oscar-winning writer-director. It was about the life of a beloved historical figure, and a year after the phenomenal success of ABC’s slavery epic *Roots*, it seemed certain that a miniseries about Martin Luther King would be a hit with critics and viewers. Instead, *King* met with controversy and failure. Civil rights activists protested it and television critics were suspicious of its docudrama format. Most of the public avoided it: the first of its three episodes came in dead last in the week’s A. C. Nielsen ratings, and the other episodes didn’t fare much better. A *TV Guide* editorial on *King* was typical in its simultaneous praise for the miniseries’ important subject matter and criticism of the way it represented the past, concluding that “by distorting history so violently and unjustifiably, it is irresponsible—and ultimately dangerous—fiction.”¹ This article explores why *King* was regarded as “dangerous.” The miniseries created a nexus of anxieties about race, history, and television: the fear that the burgeoning docudrama genre was encroaching on journalism and history, the fear that King’s image was being appropriated by whites, and the fear that Americans hadn’t progressed much since the movement, as proven by their failure to watch a movie about it.

1 “As We See It,” *TV Guide*, March 11, 1978, A6.

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Today, *King* is an obscure text. But at the time, it was a flashpoint for debates about docudrama, and debates about post-civil rights racial politics. Because of NBC promotion, black investment in the topic, controversies about historical accuracy, and the program's surprising failure in the ratings, the story splashed out of the entertainment pages and onto the news sections, and was covered for more than eight months. The television docudrama was not new in 1978, but the genre's proliferation in the late 1970s led to more discussion about it in the popular press. While networks saw the genre as high-quality programming, journalists and historians regarded it with contempt: docudramas were dismissed in *Time* as "television's instant-history movies."² While writers in the mainstream press were primarily concerned with genre, black observers criticized how King was portrayed. A *Baltimore Afro-American* columnist called *King* a "disguised attack on Dr. King's leadership, courage and heroism," and a "re-assassination."³ At a time when blacks felt that civil rights gains were being threatened by anti-affirmative action sentiment, and enrollment in civil rights organizations was dwindling, black activists were highly protective of King's image. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a group of activist ministers that King helped to create, led a campaign against *King*. SCLC official Tyrone Brooks said, "If we don't fight this film, King will become America's new Uncle Tom. You see, the writers molded him into a nice, quiet guy who was told by a white man that if he had difficulties being a leader, he could help him. . . . What Uncle Tom character inspired a child to be a leader?"⁴ Brooks and others feared that remembering King this way would stifle continuing struggles for social equality.

An analysis of articles from mainstream and black publications shows that race was central to how people analyzed *King* as a historical text.⁵ This includes whether or not they thought it was "true," on what grounds they made that evaluation, and who they thought had authority to tell the story. In short, what was considered "dangerous" about *King* differed along racial lines. Of course, there are variations and contradictions within these large categories, but the differences between white and black reception are the most striking.

Notions of the "real" have been key to previous scholarship on race and representation. Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis's landmark ethnography of viewers of *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–1992) found that black and white respondents had different notions

2 Frank Rich, "Truths and Consequences," *Time*, February 13, 1978, 78.

3 Samuel F. Yvette, "Millions Saw Second Assassination," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 4, 1978, 5.

4 Barbra Zuanich, "King," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, February 14, 1978.

5 This analysis is based on articles from fifty-nine publications, including magazines, large and small city newspapers, and black newspapers. I use the term "mainstream" to describe publications aimed at a general, and therefore predominantly white, audience, and the term "black" for publications produced for blacks. I assume that most articles in mainstream publications were written by whites, and that most black press articles were written by blacks. In 1978, minorities represented 3.95 percent of newspaper employees (blacks were 2 percent), and 68 percent of the nation's papers had no minority journalists (Pamela Newkirk, *Within the Veil: Black Journalists, White Media* [New York: New York University Press, 2000], xxviii, 222, and 91). A 1970 study of black newspapers found that only 10 percent of their employees were white (Ernest Hynds, *American Newspapers in the 1970s* [New York: Hastings House, 1974], 106). While television reviewers were virtually all white, some mainstream newspapers did assign black journalists to stories about the *King* controversy.

of how “real,” or true to life, the program was. For whites, the show was a realistic depiction of “normal” (white) family life, but an atypical (unrealistic) depiction of what most blacks were like. Conversely, black respondents emphasized how “real” black families like the Huxtables were.⁶ Aniko Bodroghkozy’s analysis of responses to the Diahann Carroll sitcom *Julia* (CBS, 1968–1971) found that “reality” was central to viewers’ criticism that the show wasn’t “telling it like it is” because it didn’t deal with the difficulties faced by working-class and poor blacks.⁷ While this article is an examination of responses to a historical text, the notion of what seems “real” or “true” resonates because historical “accuracy” is a discourse about “reality.”

My analysis of race and the reception of *King* is informed by critical historiography, in particular the work of Michel Foucault and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. According to Foucault, one of the ways that we can analyze the workings of power is to examine the rules that govern what is considered to be true. The debate over television docudrama in the late 1970s is an example of what Foucault calls “the battle around truth,” a struggle over the “rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true.”⁸ Most important to the debates surrounding *King* are struggles over the types of discourse that can be considered true, the representational codes of truth, and who gets to determine what is true.⁹ There were struggles over whether or not narrative television could be trusted with history (types of discourse), specifically history constructed by blending news footage with dramatic scenes (representational codes), and whether or not Abby Mann, as a white person, or as a Hollywood screenwriter who was neither a journalist nor a historian, had the authority to tell civil rights history (who gets to determine what is true).

Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that we should be mindful of the material reality of “what happened” and what is at stake for people as they enact and write history. His work on critical historiography is particularly useful to media studies because he argues that what we call “history” is a matter of production as well as reception. According to Trouillot, there is a “contingent and necessary” need for a distinction between history and fiction.¹⁰ Some narratives go back and forth between the categories, and others confound the distinction. But the distinction is necessary because “at some stage, for reasons that themselves are historical, most often spurred by controversy, collectivities experience the need to impose a test of credibility on certain events and narratives because it matters *to them* whether these events are true or false, whether these stories are fact or fiction.”¹¹ This was the case with *King*. As former SCLC president Ralph Abernathy said, “I don’t think, as black people, we can afford anybody tampering

6 Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).

7 Aniko Bodroghkozy, “Is This What You Mean by Color TV?: Race, Gender, and Contested Meanings in NBC’s *Julia*” in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 143–167.

8 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 74.

9 Ibid.

10 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 8.

11 Ibid., 11. Emphasis in original.

with our history.”¹² As a docudrama, *King* blurred the boundaries between history and fiction. For white journalists who felt their authority was under siege by television producers, and for black activists who feared that whites were commandeering King’s image, it mattered deeply whether the miniseries was history, and therefore legitimate, or fiction, and therefore dangerous.

King as Quality Television. *Newsweek* previewed the 1977–1978 television season with high hopes, saying that the turn to miniseries and docudramas was a great improvement over banal sitcoms and detective shows, and could perhaps change television forever.¹³ The networks also regarded historical and political drama and docudrama as high-quality television; they poured millions into the genre and gave epic miniseries huge swaths of the schedule. *King* was part of this endeavor. In fact, NBC’s print ads touted *King* as “the most powerful drama ever made for television!” *King* premiered Sunday, February 12, 1978, and aired in two-hour installments three nights in a row, covering King’s life from 1952 to his assassination in 1968. The first segment shows Martin Luther King dating and marrying Coretta Scott, then getting involved with the Montgomery bus boycott and other civil rights activity. The second night of the miniseries portrays the 1963 Birmingham campaign, the March on Washington, and the 1965 marches from Selma to Montgomery. The final installment depicts King’s 1966 trip to Chicago to protest housing discrimination, his opposition to the Vietnam War, his involvement in the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers’ strike, and finally, his assassination. In addition to the historical scope and serious topic, the cost and labor put into making the miniseries “authentic” were key attributes that made it a “quality” program. It was often quoted that *King* cost NBC \$5 million to produce. This seems to have been a very costly undertaking: in comparison, *Roots*, which ran twelve hours, cost \$6 million.¹⁴ As is the case with many docudramas, the creators emphasized how much work they did in the name of accuracy. Much of *King* was filmed in the South (Macon, Georgia), and two scenes were shot in Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King and his father were pastors.¹⁵ Ebenezer’s congregation filled the pews for scenes re-creating a 1953 sermon by the senior King and a 1966 sermon by Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁶ King’s children and his brother had bit parts in the film; the oldest child, Yolanda, portrayed Rosa Parks.

The *King* production featured a talented cast and creator known for working on socially relevant productions. Acclaimed actors Paul Winfield and Cicely Tyson portrayed Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King. Tyson had appeared in the drama *East Side, West Side* (CBS, 1963–1964), as well as *Roots*, and four years before *King* she won an Emmy for her starring role in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (ABC, 1974), a miniseries about a woman whose life spanned from slavery to the civil rights movement.

12 Jeff Prugh, “Associates of King Dispute New Film,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1977.

13 Harry F. Waters, “Sons of ‘Roots’: TV Runs to Serials,” *Newsweek*, September 5, 1977, 52.

14 Tom Shales, “Rooting for History,” *Washington Post*, January 28, 1979.

15 Jim Lee, “M. L. King Jr. Movie Filming Starts in Macon,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, June 14, 1977.

16 Marcia Kunstel, “King’s Old Flock Helps Make Film,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, June 26, 1977.

Tyson and Winfield had costarred as husband and wife in *Souder* (Martin Ritt, 1972), a film about black sharecroppers in 1930s Louisiana; they were both nominated for Academy Awards for their performances.¹⁷ *Souder* was Winfield's biggest role to date, but he had held steady jobs in film and television, including the lead in *It's Good to Be Alive*, a 1974 CBS movie about baseball player Roy Campanella, Jr. Respected actors such as Ossie Davis (as Martin Luther King, Sr.), Howard Rollins (as activist Andrew Young), Stephen Hill (as advisor Stanley Levison), Roscoe Lee Browne, and Al Freeman, Jr. (both as composite characters) rounded out the cast. *King's* writer-director, Abby Mann, was also a well-regarded talent, having won an Academy Award for the screenplay for *Judgment at Nuremberg* (Stanley Kramer, 1961), which dramatized Nazi war crimes trials, and two Emmys for CBS's 1973 television movie *The Marcus-Nelson Murders*, a racially charged drama that spawned the detective series *Kojak* (CBS, 1973–1978).

Television writers in the mainstream press were most impressed by Winfield's performance and by *King's* overall emotional power. The vast majority of critics (black and white), even those who disliked the movie, thought Winfield's performance was its high point. They praised him in particular for how well he was able to evoke memories of King. Several critics pointed out that Winfield was unable to duplicate King's hallmark: his sonorous baritone voice. However, they credited him with taking on such a daunting task. Winfield's dedication to the role (his thirty-pound weight gain was often noted) and virtuosity were key elements of *King's* "quality." Critics also deemed *King* "quality" television because it was able to elicit their emotions and memories about an important historical subject. They called the miniseries powerful, stirring, and inspiring. It seems that a significant portion of *King's* perceived "power" was conferred by the actual history of the civil rights movement. Television writers', and other viewers' praise of the miniseries often overlapped with their nostalgia for the movements and, for King himself. For example, the *Dallas Morning News's* television editor said the film's strengths were "the natural drama of the civil rights movement, the courage and conviction of the participants, the unforgettable eloquence of King's speeches, the dignity of Winfield's performance."¹⁸ Accuracy and quality were linked in this discourse of "power": *King* was powerful because it was true to the thrilling aspects of the movement. Even when critics disliked the movie, they often reckoned with the importance of its subject. For example, Tom Shales of *The Washington Post* wrote that *King's* subject "has such strength and still carries such meaning that the film's many shortcomings often seem unimportant."¹⁹ Interestingly, even for those who harshly criticized the docudrama genre (like Shales), this blending of fact and fiction in their own responses usually went unremarked.

Docudrama, "the Treacherous Form." Reviews in mainstream papers were marked with contradiction: writers loved *King's* content but hated its form. Mann did

17 Winfield and Tyson also played husband and wife in *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (Ralph Nelson, 1978), which was released months after *King* aired.

18 Rena Pederson, "Civil Rights Fight Remembered in Eloquent TV Drama 'King,'" *Dallas Morning News*, February 12, 1978.

19 Tom Shales, "Controversy and the King Portrait," *Washington Post*, February 11, 1978.

not want *King* to be associated with other docudramas, saying, "It is simply a drama."²⁰ But he also clung to the authenticity of his endeavor: "I wanted to remind people this really did happen and this is the way it was, literally."²¹ Mann used the notion of "quality" to differentiate between his work and the genre. According to Mann, docudramas were "literal dramatizations," while his work tried to "examine the people involved and probe beneath the events."²² Despite Mann's objections, *King* was routinely categorized as a docudrama by the press. The network treated it as one, as well. Before each installment of *King*, NBC aired the following advisory: "This program is a dramatization, based on the life and accomplishments of one man. In some instances, dialogue, action and composite characters were created to advance the story. Actual newsfilm is used in some sequences and combined with new footage shot especially for this occasion."²³ This advisory, apparently the first of its kind for television, suggested that *King* was a hybrid of fact and fiction, and that it had to be carefully navigated by the viewer.

An analysis of the opening moments of the miniseries illustrates much of what was controversial about it. *King* begins in 1968 with a reenactment of a march in Memphis. It opens in black and white, silent, with an extreme close-up of King looking fatigued and afraid. The sound comes up, and we hear black youths jeering King with "You gonna walk on the water?" and "Uncle Chicken Wing!" The camera pulls back to show King walking arm-in-arm with civil rights leaders who are holding him up and pulling him along. The taunting young men are still on King's heels, and he is either pushed or stumbles. The other leaders rush to get him away from the protest as glass breaks and shots ring out in the background. Right from the start, *King* blends fictional and historic imagery in multiple ways. The re-created images are grainy, like old film. When the characters start to run, the camera work is shaky and disorienting, as if the camera operator were capturing the event as it happened. As King is in a car being rushed to his motel room, he looks at the destruction around him; eyeline matches show archival and re-created "footage" of chaotic street scenes. Exhausted and dismayed, he closes his eyes and sinks back.

With a cut to King's motel room, the images are stable and in color. King is lying in bed in his underwear, curled in the fetal position. An aide pulls the bed sheets over him and goes into the next room, where civil rights leaders are shouting and trying to figure out what went wrong. After a while, one turns to the aide and asks how King is doing. He responds, "I've never seen him so depressed. I'm afraid for him, man." The next scenes show King back home, with Coretta Scott King dealing with her husband's despondence, and encouraging him to continue the struggle. She thinks back to when she met him in 1952, when he was a pampered, flamboyant preacher's son. In her flashback to their first date, Martin is presumptuous and bawdy while Coretta is the serious and politically minded one. This flashback is the beginning of the miniseries' chronology. Starting the miniseries with King's frail last days and his flashy youth was in keeping with Mann's attempt to show King's human side. The initial

20 Prugh, "Associates of King Dispute New Film."

21 Gerald C. Lubenow, "TV's Towering 'King,'" *Newsweek*, February 13, 1978, 97.

22 Cecil Smith, "At Long Last, 'King' Becomes Reality," *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1978.

23 Lawrence Laurent, "How the West Was Won for 15 Weeks," *Washington Post*, February 12, 1978.

focus on King's exhaustion and mistreatment showed the tension between civil rights leaders and the black youths who disrupted the march, and hinted at the disintegration of King's ideals for the movement. However, blacks who criticized *King* often saw these representational strategies as efforts to make King seem "weak." Their view is further supported by images of King being carried, put to bed, and later cared for at home like an invalid or a child. One of the SCLC's complaints was that Mrs. King's role was inflated in the film; this finds traction in the fact that the early moments show her as the calming force and the political impetus in King's life. Indeed, the viewer is taken to the beginning of King's story through his wife's flashback: this narrative device makes her the focal point.

Beginning with black-and-white gives a sense that what we are seeing is historical (real); in this sequence, it is difficult to discern what has been created for *King* and what is original footage. For viewers who remembered, the first sequence's emotional intensity and urgency had the potential to thrust them back into the 1960s. Techniques that blur the representational codes of truth and fiction are used in several ways throughout the miniseries. Past the opening scene, most of *King* is in keeping with the visual style of 1970s television drama. But there are several moments where original footage and what one reviewer called "pseudo-documentary footage"²⁴ blend again into what John J. O'Connor of the *New York Times* called a "a black-and-white blur of fact and recreated fact."²⁵ This happens in the depiction of famous events such as the Birmingham campaign, the March on Washington, and the marches from Selma to Montgomery. The result is a sense of the players being placed in the original event instead of a wholesale re-creation of that event. This happens in other ways as well. A birthday party for one of King's children is mixed with images shot to look like a home movie, and according to one source, actual King family home movies were also used in this scene.²⁶ A scene depicting a protest King led in Chicago remains in color, but it blends fact and fiction through camerawork. When a mob of angry whites attacks the marchers, the image blinks, shakes, and falls, landing on its side. Moments like this jar the spectator by asking through which camera one is watching the scene: is it a movie camera, or a broadcast news camera? All of the above strategies have the potential to draw viewers into the subject, or to kick them out of it by disrupting the sense of realism by suddenly making viewers aware of the camera.

Some sources suggest that Mann was among the first American media producers to blend fact and fiction to this degree. This blending was central to mainstream journalists' reviews of *King*. A few critics praised *King*'s mixture of factual and fictional imagery as a way to enhance the feeling that the work was "history." A reporter who covered King during the movement argued that by "intercutting old newsreel footage and specifically filmed black-and-white scenes, 'King' achieves a verisimilitude that often leaves the viewer uncertain of the line between reality and drama."²⁷ The *Dallas Morning News*'s television editor suggested that the use of original footage was necessary for

24 "Winfield Brilliant, but Portrait of Dr. King Fails," *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 10, 1978.

25 John J. O'Connor, "TV: 6-Hour 'King,' Drama of Civil Rights Drive," *New York Times*, February 9, 1978.

26 Arthur Unger, "'King': 'No American Should Miss It,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, February 10, 1978.

27 Lubenow, "TV's Towering 'King,'" 97.

credibility. He said Mann “must have sensed some white viewers would resent and not believe scenes of civil rights demonstrators being beaten by white crowds and Southern policemen.”²⁸ In this view, the original footage bolstered the story by drawing on the authenticity and “objectivity” of journalism. Some critics argued that this strategy could bring back viewers’ memories and stir their emotions. For example, *Village Voice* columnist James Wolcott called *King* a “bastard epic—part fiction, part history,” and “a hornet’s nest of ambiguities,” suggesting the docudrama’s illegitimacy and danger. But he also praised it for these qualities; before viewing, he’d feared the miniseries would be “a memorial,” like the one Coretta Scott King was trying to build in Atlanta, “waxen, flower-strewn, deathly dull. It isn’t. *King* . . . is choppy, confusing, inaccurate, and incomplete; it is marred by snorting performances, unsteady photography, and drab, preachy dialogue. But the damn thing is rudely, triumphantly alive.”²⁹

While some critics valued Mann’s strategies, most writers in major newspapers and news magazines did not. Their conflicted stance about *King* is summed up well by a subheadline for Shales’s review: “Reality Is Twisted, Shortcomings Abound, but in the End It Is a Stirring Saga.”³⁰ O’Connor of the *New York Times* praised its lofty subject, but stated that “purely as ‘docu-drama,’ ‘King’ does not avoid the familiar pitfalls of the treacherous form.”³¹ *Time*’s Frank Rich wrote a mixed review of *King* and the docudrama *Ruby and Oswald* (which aired on CBS four days before *King* aired on NBC) that was typical of the responses to *King* in major news sources. Rich praised *King*’s quality and emotional power, saying the civil rights struggles were “reenacted with corrosive force.” However, he disapproved of instances where fact met fiction, such as casting singer Tony Bennett and activist-turned-politician Julian Bond as themselves. Rich was most critical of the use of news footage. He saw this as the “true absurdity” of docudrama: “If the networks would only rebroadcast the news film in their archives instead of re-enacting it, they would waste less of their money and less of the audience’s time.”³² But the most troubling aspect of *King* was that it shored up its authenticity by using broadcast journalism.

The criticisms of *King* in major papers and magazines reflect two related charges that journalists and historians leveled against docudrama. The first was that docudramas exploited television’s authority—especially the authority from broadcast news—to convey truth, and the second was that viewers would accept the docudrama’s version of the events as true. The genre’s mixture of fact and fiction was more than aesthetically foul; to concerned commentators, docudrama was dangerous, a threat to society. Shales, talking about several docudramas, including *King*, said that blending original footage and “questionable speculative reenactments . . . tell[s] viewers that on television, fantasy and reality should be regarded as equals.”³³ A *TV Guide* editorial called *King*’s use of original footage and a fabricated discussion between King and Malcolm X (erroneously set the

28 Pederson, “Civil Rights Fight Remembered in Eloquent TV Drama ‘King.’”

29 James Wolcott, “When We Dead Awaken,” *Village Voice*, February 27, 1978, 36.

30 Shales, “Controversy and the King Portrait.”

31 O’Connor, “TV: 6-Hour ‘King.’”

32 Rich, “Truths and Consequences.”

33 Tom Shales, “Hey Diddle Diddle, Fiddling with History,” *Washington Post*, February 8, 1978.

year after Malcolm X died) “subversive.”³⁴ the *Washington Post*, a paragon of American journalism, devoted a staff editorial to condemning *King* specifically, and the docudrama form in general. According to the editorial board, *King* was “on dangerous ground,” despite its disclaimer. “This ‘docu-drama’ merged two of the products television offers to the public—news and entertainment—in a way that made them indistinguishable from each other. By blurring the line, television undermines its greatest public service: letting people see and hear history in the making or in retrospect.”³⁵ Journalism, in print, nightly news, or documentaries, was supposed to be the way people learned about recent history. Appearing long before stories about television were common in daily newspapers, news coverage devoted to *King* indicated how high the stakes were for some journalists.

The desire to keep journalism above docudrama’s “distortions” was abundantly clear in the *Washington Post* editorial, which ended with the following pronouncement: “Television is much too powerful a medium of communication to be playing so loose with the line between fiction and fact. It is already hard enough to keep them separated. A ‘docu-drama’ is as offensive to journalism and history as the word itself is to the English language.”³⁶ Such concerns seem to have been greatest for journalists at nationally recognized papers (and magazines) of record, such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*. Journalists at other mainstream publications, including large-circulation metropolitan papers, seemed less troubled. Like writers at the nation’s top publications, they talked about the contradictions and flaws in the docudrama genre, and they tended to think *King* was good television (with entertainment and symbolic value), even if it wasn’t necessarily good history. The key difference was that these writers were far less incensed about the possibility that Hollywood was overstepping its bounds by doing history.

It is possible that writers at publications recognized as the most authoritative would be particularly protective of that authority. Indeed, in her research on journalism and popular memory, Barbie Zelizer found that journalists who covered the assassination of President John F. Kennedy established themselves as “authoritative spokespersons” for the story, and that their struggle to maintain this authority included discrediting others who created alternative narratives of the event. They thus “strengthen[ed] their position as cultural authorities concerning events of the ‘real world.’”³⁷ The sharp criticism of *King* as a docudrama is similar to journalists’ responses to Oliver Stone’s film *JFK* (1991), which offered a conspiracy theory of the Kennedy assassination. According to Zelizer, “At the root of discussions about the film was the question of whether Stone possessed sufficient credentials to set forth a view of the assassination.”³⁸ As was the case with Stone, several journalists decided that as a Hollywood screenwriter, Mann did not have the proper credentials. Mann’s authority would be challenged by black activists and journalists as well, but on different grounds.

34 “As We See It,” *TV Guide*, March 11, 1978.

35 “Fact/Fiction on Television,” *Washington Post*, February 20, 1978.

36 Ibid.

37 Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1–2.

38 Ibid., 205.

Who Speaks for King? Throughout the *King* controversy, Abby Mann repeated his story of how the miniseries originated. According to Mann, he met King in 1966, and King agreed that he could write a screenplay about his life. Mann interviewed King several times and got to know him well. He wrote a screenplay, but could not find a film studio that was interested in it. He said, "After a while I stopped calling him because I was ashamed to tell him that nobody in Hollywood wanted to put up the money for a program about Martin Luther King, who I considered to be our greatest American."³⁹ Mann kept pitching the idea until 1975, when NBC signed on. He used this story as proof of the miniseries' authenticity. Most writers in the mainstream press took it for granted that Mann depicted King accurately. When King's portrayal was discussed, the verdict was usually in favor of the movie. For example, some praised *King* for looking at King's strengths and weaknesses. A writer for the *Austin American-Statesman* praised the portrayal of King as "not an untouchable, mythic hero, but a very real man, a man of passion as well as peace, a man torn by his doubts and fears despite all his brave conviction, a man who got the hiccoughs out of fear, just before going on to perform acts of great courage. A real man, a hero of our time."⁴⁰ *Newsweek's* review began with the final scene, King's autopsy, saying "by this point in the story, Mann has so deftly dissected King's life and violent times, so thoroughly probed the private doubt and indecision that lay beneath the bold public posture, that the actual incision in his naked torso seems a modest intrusion."⁴¹ This is the image of King that Mann wanted to portray.

There were a few charges that King was portrayed as too perfect. A negative *Chicago Sun-Times* review advised viewers to savor the moments when King admits to smoking and momentarily wavers on nonviolent protest: "They are the only ones that portray him as anything less than a hero, saint and martyr."⁴² Similarly, a mixed review by Larry Williams of the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* said this was the miniseries' greatest fault. "Even though he intones at one point that he isn't a saint, King immediately, as per script instructions, resumes being one."⁴³ The subtext in this kind of criticism seemed to be the miniseries' reticence to delve into King's rumored extramarital affairs.⁴⁴ The *National Review's* column on *King* stated this clearly, contending that it was "disingenuous to present King as a saint. He was, after all, not only an adulterer but a libertine who took his own marriage vows lightly."⁴⁵ Critics wary of King's "perfection" occasionally asserted that Mann was blinded by his liberal politics and his affection for King. For example, Williams asserted that "Abby Mann may have been too much the worshipper and too less [*sic*] the observer." By suggesting that he was too

39 Gary Deeb, "Shooting Ends, Shouting Begins on King Film," *Chicago Tribune*, August 15, 1977.

40 "Last Two Parts of 'King' a Must See," *Austin American-Statesman*, February 13, 1978.

41 Lubenow, "TV's Towering 'King,'" 97.

42 "Winfield Brilliant, but Portrait of Dr. King Fails."

43 Larry Williams, "How West Was Won Has Good Points," *Commercial Appeal*, February 13, 1978, 26.

44 After a scene revealing that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover has a lurid audiotape, there is a tearful exchange between Martin and Coretta about an anonymously delivered tape. Its contents aren't discussed, and the implication is that Coretta won't play it.

45 M. J. Sobran, Jr., "You Weren't There," *National Review*, March 31, 1978, 418.

politically and emotionally close to the subject, these criticisms raised the question of whether or not Mann was objective enough (as journalists ostensibly were) to create an authentic story about King.

Conversely, several black commentators charged that the portrayal was inaccurate because King was portrayed as *too* flawed. In August 1977, while *King* was still being filmed in Georgia, SCLC leaders began their protest against it. Brooks threatened a boycott, saying, "We are not going to pay for the exploitation and defamation of Dr. King."⁴⁶ Abernathy led the charge against *King*, along with Brooks and SCLC executive director Hosea Williams. Throughout the campaign, the SCLC made several demands. At the initial press conference, they said they were concerned that the "sacred" history of King and the movement were not being handled with sensitivity and accuracy. They called for the production team to bring in black writers, producers, and directors and to hire an advisory panel of movement activists.⁴⁷ Later, the SCLC asked that *King* be withdrawn from circulation and corrected. The SCLC's demands were fueled by three main criticisms. The first was that the docudrama distorted the image of Martin Luther King: according to Williams, it portrayed him as "uncertain, having no definite opinions, [fearful], and unsure of himself."⁴⁸ The second criticism was that *King* diminished the roles of important civil rights activists, in particular Abernathy and Williams. The third was closely related to the second: the SCLC charged that the miniseries overstated the role of Stanley Levison, a white lawyer who had been one of King's advisors.⁴⁹

Based on a reading of the script, Abernathy declared that the film was "not about the Martin I was with all the way from Montgomery to Memphis. . . . How could it be . . . when it plays up the role of a white like Mr. Stan Levison, who was way in the background raising some funds, and totally ignores—not a line—the role of a black like Hosea Williams, who led more marches than I can remember. Mrs. King should put a stop to this."⁵⁰ Abernathy's statement reveals that the struggle for authority to tell King's story wasn't just between the SCLC and Abby Mann. Abernathy's insistence that Mrs. King should intercede pointed to a long-standing contest between the SCLC and Coretta Scott King; since King's death, they had been at odds about who was truly carrying on King's legacy, and therefore, who could properly represent him. The struggle between Mrs. King and the SCLC was ideological, institutional, and personal. According to historian Gary Daynes, the King family was committed to his work, but unlike the SCLC, they lacked "an institutional mandate to continue

46 "Dr. King Movie a Rip-Off; Shows Him as Uncle Tom," *Atlanta Inquirer*, August 13, 1977.

47 Ibid.

48 Roxanne Brown, "'King' Viewpoints Vary," *Michigan Chronicle* (Detroit), February 25, 1978.

49 The SCLC also made some potentially offensive claims. Williams called *King's* producers a "rich clique of New York Jews" and Abernathy insinuated that the King family had been bribed for their support of the movie. B. Drummond Ayres, Jr., "TV Movie on Dr. King Rekindles Rancor Between Widow and Aides," *New York Times*, August 28, 1977; and Alexis Scott Reeves, "Abernathy Says Payoffs Made on King TV Film," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, February 18, 1978.

50 Ayres, "TV Movie on Dr. King Rekindles Rancor Between Widow and Aides."

doing exactly what Martin did.”⁵¹ The SCLC continued nonviolent protest as a way to honor him, while Mrs. King memorialized her husband by creating the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change (the King Center), which would educate the public about racial unity.⁵² Because King donated most of his earnings to the SCLC, his family inherited little money when he died. Mrs. King’s desire to build the King Center was an effort to continue her husband’s mission as well as to secure financial stability.⁵³ In 1976, Mrs. King began lobbying for a federal King holiday; raising funds to build the center and garnering public support for the holiday required Mrs. King to champion a safer version of King, one that would be more palatable to mainstream America.⁵⁴ As Daynes put it, “with its emphasis on protest, activism, and against-popular-opinion standard bearing, the SCLC was clearly wedded to the [more radical] 1966–68 King, while Mrs. King stood closer to the King of 1963–64, the speaker at the March on Washington, the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.”⁵⁵ Competition for national attention and funding led the SCLC and the King family to feud openly. Each side laid claim to King’s legacy, but Mrs. King’s approach turned out to be the more successful one.

Each side had its own stakes in *King*. Mrs. King was mostly quiet about the miniseries, but Michael Eric Dyson’s work on King’s legacy offers a way to understand her involvement. Martin’s insistence that Coretta stay home with their children kept her from being publicly involved in the movement. But as his widow, his “soulmate and surrogate,” she was able to become an international leader. Dyson called this an ingenious transformation of “the boundaries of her former existence as solely a wife and mother into a celebration of her domestic duties.”⁵⁶ *King*’s emphasis on Coretta’s role in Martin’s life, as in the flashback described earlier, is partly due to the generic conventions of biographical dramas, which often include romantic subplots. But the knowledge that Mrs. King struggled to assert her independence and to be more active in the movement makes some dramatic choices seem to be the result of the producers’ empathy with her, or possibly the product of an agreement to show this aspect of her life. After all, she was on the payroll, and her endorsement gave the miniseries a perceived authenticity. For example, a scene depicting Coretta and Martin’s early years as a couple when he was a minister in Montgomery shows her standing in church to sing. Her classically trained soprano voice is quickly drowned out by the congregation’s flat, booming tones. This scene illustrates how Coretta, who had a degree in musical performance, would be soon overshadowed by Martin’s obligations as a minister and a civil rights leader. This is a point of view that likely came from Mrs. King herself.

51 Gary Daynes, *Making Villains, Making Heroes: Joseph R. McCarthy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Politics of American Memory* (New York: Garland Press, 1997), 50–51.

52 Ibid.

53 Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 269.

54 Ibid., 276–278.

55 Daynes, *Making Villains, Making Heroes*, 54–56.

56 Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You*, 220.

Scholars and activists have argued that Abernathy felt that he was in King's shadow. During King's life and after his death, Abernathy often expected to receive the same fame and adoration as his friend.⁵⁷ King had been the SCLC's founding president and Abernathy, his best friend, was vice president. After King's death, Abernathy succeeded him as president but wasn't able to draw the same attention and funding that King had. Abernathy's desire to be in the spotlight no doubt fueled his actions: he'd resigned as SCLC president before the campaign against *King* began, yet he was the most vocal protester. Like many civil rights organizations, the SCLC was in financial trouble in the 1970s. They feared that blacks, including the nascent black middle class, no longer saw civil rights groups like the SCLC as relevant.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Mrs. King was successfully raising thousands of dollars for the King Center. The fact that Mrs. King was a paid consultant for the miniseries and endorsed it wholeheartedly no doubt added to the bitterness between herself and Abernathy.⁵⁹

Those involved with *King*'s production responded to the SCLC's demands by asserting their own authority. Mrs. King responded to the SCLC's initial volley in a press release, saying, "'King' is a drama and not a documentary; therefore, it should be judged as such. No one could be more concerned than I am about how my husband's image is being projected or about the authenticity of the film in general."⁶⁰ This statement asserted her authority over King's image, and simultaneously defended the miniseries for its dramatic license and its historical accuracy. Abby Mann also defended the miniseries in interviews and press conferences, saying, "I know as well as anyone what Dr. King would have wanted the film to be—because he told me."⁶¹ Ultimately, a few unspecified changes were made to the final product in response to the SCLC protest. NBC pointed out that there wasn't time to make substantial changes, and the publicity director for the miniseries said that the SCLC didn't "know enough about scripts or moviemaking to be making the kind of . . . criticisms they have."⁶² However, promotion for *King* included a clear instance of compromise with the SCLC's demands. Mrs. King wrote an article for *TV Guide* that recalled her husband and the movement in terms that were in keeping with her goals for the King Center and the federal holiday. She stressed King's universal appeal and asserted that she and the movement

57 "Memphis Dreams: Searching for the Promised Land," *The Century* (ABC, 1999). See also Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); and *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006). Mann also suggested that Abernathy's ego was the root of his criticisms. Gary Deeb, "King Film Author Criticizes Critics," *Chicago Tribune*, August 14, 1977.

58 Jeff Prugh, "Leaderless SCLC Falls on Hard Times," *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 1977. Former SCLC member Jesse Jackson, the most visible civil rights activist of the late 1970s as the leader of Operation PUSH, was not portrayed in *King*. He disagreed with that omission, but said he didn't want to be part of the campaign against it. In a comment that seemed aimed at the SCLC, which had suspended him years prior, Jackson said, "We are doing so many meaningful things at PUSH that we don't really need to fight for our identity in history." Gary Deeb, "Operation Omit," *Chicago Tribune*, January 31, 1978.

59 Ayres, "TV Movie on Dr. King Rekindles Rancor Between Widow and Aides." Levison, who was then Mrs. King's attorney, was also a paid consultant.

60 Jay Lawrence, "'King' Movie Distorts Man, Movement, Followers Assert," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, August 10, 1977.

61 Deeb, "King Film Author Criticizes Critics."

62 Jay Lawrence, "No Changes in 'King' Likely," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, August 11, 1977.

Figure 1. The illustration accompanying a *TV Guide* article promoting *King* shows Martin Luther King, Jr., arm-in-arm with Ralph Abernathy (*TV Guide*, February 11, 1978).

were "sharing him with all Americans."⁶³ The essay was illustrated with a pen-and-ink drawing of King in what looks like one of the Selma marches (Figure 1). King is in front of a group of protestors who are rendered anonymously in shadow or outline. Arm-in-arm with King, the only other person who can be clearly identified is Abernathy.⁶⁴ While there are images of King and Abernathy that resemble this (including images from Selma), images of Dr. and Mrs. King together during the final Selma march, often with their arms linked, are more widely circulated. The latter imagery was not

63 Coretta Scott King, "We Were Sharing Him with All Americans, Black and White," *TV Guide*, February 11, 1978, 4.

64 There were three Selma marches in support of voting rights. Two were ended by police violence or intimidation. Only the third reached its destination, the Alabama capitol building in Montgomery. The presence of a nun in the drawing evokes famous images of the six nuns who joined one of the marches.

Figure 2. This image from *King* was used often in promoting the miniseries. It reenacts widely circulated news photographs taken at the Selma marches (*Cleveland Press* television supplement, February 10, 1978).

only re-created in *King*, but was distributed as a publicity still that was widely used in the press (Figure 2).⁶⁵ The *TV Guide* depiction of King with Abernathy instead of Mrs. King, despite the fact that she authored the essay, could be read as a significant concession to the SCLC's claims that Abernathy's role was diminished and her role was inflated in *King*.

Black Viewers and *King*. It is clear that the SCLC campaign against *King* was partly motivated by competition and personal grievances. But the SCLC protest also connected the civil rights movement and television in ways that resonated with viewers who were critical of the industry's racial practices. While the discourse of accuracy in the mainstream press focused on the miniseries' generic conventions, in the black press accuracy was measured in terms of how King and the movement were represented.

Writers in the mainstream press praised *King* even as they felt it came up short, but most reviews of *King* in the black press were decidedly negative. They usually heaped praise on Winfield before bashing the program, but that wasn't the case in "I'm Not Crying Over 'King,'" in which *Baltimore Afro-American* writer Ida Peters asserted, "The white press service says it was beautifully acted. It wasn't. It was a mess. It made me so mad I turned the set off."⁶⁶

In the mainstream press, the docudrama debate was about the illegitimacy of Hollywood producers. In the black press it was about the illegitimacy of *white* producers. Among black activists and writers, the main issue in the *King* debate was who King's legacy belonged to, and who could tell the story. Like several writers in the mainstream press, Samuel F. Yvette of the *Baltimore Afro-American* (author of the "re-assassination" quotation) criticized the disclaimers NBC aired before each installment of *King*. However, instead of discussing the flaws of docudrama, Yvette compared the disclaimers to signs in the windows of segregated shops that read "We reserve the right to refuse services to anyone." He wrote, "Those signs meant that the personhood and worth of every would-be customer was defined by the proprietor. That is also what the film's

65 In addition, in *King* the march is preceded by an important scene revealing Coretta's character: she confronts Martin and refuses to let him leave her behind on another protest.

66 Ida Peters, "I'm Not Crying Over 'King,'" *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 25, 1978.

fine print meant. Abby Mann, the writer-director and proprietor of the King legacy, reserved the right to define King on Mann's terms."⁶⁷ Yvette and other writers in the black press situated *King* within the context of the racial power structure in the television industry, with its limited black representations and dearth of behind-the-camera opportunities for blacks. There were three main discourses about *King* in the black press. The first was that the miniseries misrepresented King and the movement. The second attacked Abby Mann's authority to represent King, and the third linked the distortions in *King* to the racist practices of the television industry. For some viewers, the white-dominated television industry was capitalizing on black struggles by giving authority to white writers and directors to convey "truths" about black history and experience without enough input from black people.

In the mainstream press, columnists tended to side with Mann and Mrs. King. They didn't take the SCLC campaign seriously; some openly rejected the SCLC's claims as "nitpicking," "hogwash," and "blatant nonsense."⁶⁸ Meanwhile, columnists in the black press tended to support the SCLC's position. According to Yvette, *King* showed "Dr. King's reliance on some phantom white strategist posturing as the brains of the Civil Rights Movement, and a misplaced arrogance in Dr. King, coupled with a whimpering, grimacing, confused and indecisive childishness."⁶⁹ Where black columnists differed from the SCLC is that they did not criticize Mrs. King.⁷⁰

In addition, several letters to the editor in black and mainstream papers used language that was similar to the SCLC's official statements. A letter calling for blacks to organize against the miniseries sounded like SCLC rhetoric, saying it was "a plot against all black Americans in order to take away the identity of Dr. King's character."⁷¹ Regular columnists at black newspapers also had views that were similar to those of SCLC leaders—presumably the result of shared social position and generation, and a strong investment in civil rights-era politics, culture, and economics. Because columnists are usually veteran reporters, it is easy to imagine that they, like SCLC officials, would be particularly invested in sustaining their roles as community advocates in a post-civil rights movement era in which the black press was shrinking.

Several black viewers challenged Mann's authority to tell the history of the movement. Journalists and activists asserted their firsthand knowledge of the movement and suggested that Mann should have consulted experts like themselves. Don Cornelius, producer and long-time host of the dance show *Soul Train* (syndicated, 1971–2006), rebutted the *Los Angeles Times*'s glowing review of *King* in an article-length letter published in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a black paper.⁷² Profiles of Cornelius have described him as politically reticent, although he has been known to discuss race and

67 Yvette, "Millions Saw Second Assassination."

68 "Nitpicking," in "'King' Is Major TV Experience," *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia), February 10, 1978; "Hogwash" in "Winfield Brilliant, but Portrait of Dr. King Fails"; and "Blatant Nonsense" in Cecil Smith, "'King'—A Salute with Honor and Love," *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1978.

69 Yvette, "Millions Saw Second Assassination."

70 As Dyson notes, the King family was like royalty for many blacks; open criticism was rare.

71 Janice Turner, Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 30, 1978.

72 An abridged version of the letter also appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*.

the television industry.⁷³ This letter, however, was especially strident and excoriating. Cornelius called *King*'s producers "unqualified" and disputed Mann's authority:

If I have to read or listen to another account of how well the writer, Mr. Mann "knew" Dr. King, I'm going to throw up. There is not even the slightest possibility that anyone who knew King could have written this story. I suspect that, in his anxiety, Mr. Mann has somehow made synonyms of the words "knew" and "met." The story was void of even a hint of the real essence of Martin Luther King. Unlike "Roots," it was a story that anyone who read newspapers during that period could have told. There was just nothing there, other than Mann's distortions, that most of us didn't already know.⁷⁴

For Cornelius, Mann's claim to know King not only failed to mitigate his whiteness, it showed how ignorant and presumptuous Mann was. For Cornelius and others, the miniseries was from a white perspective, and was therefore antithetical to the truth. As Brooks said, "This movie was not based on the life of Dr. King as far as history is concerned. It is a movie based on a white man's interpretation of our history."⁷⁵ Peters of the *Baltimore Afro-American* said, "I think as a news person during the King years, the TV failure came about because it told the story from a white viewpoint, not like it 'really was.'"⁷⁶ And Rosetta James of the *Amsterdam News* wrote, "Not once did I sense the true essence of either the movement or of King's personal life. Rather, it was a portrait of the movement as seen through the eyes of a white person."⁷⁷ James dismissed Mann's claim that he'd spent more than a decade researching the movie. She did so mainly on the grounds that *King* omitted civil rights activist and New York minister Wyatt T. Walker's early influence on King, a fact which she argued even Harlem janitors knew.

Are we to believe that Abby Mann with all his "book learning" didn't know enough to consult . . . Black writers . . . who wrote realistic and truthful accounts of the King movement unhindered by concern about possible white squeamishness regarding these truths? Old issues of *Ebony* magazine would have provided Mann with more insight and more authentic details of the movement.⁷⁸

These concerns echo those of the SCLC, which argued that the accuracy and sensitivity needed to portray black history could be achieved by hiring more blacks.

Black viewers often connected the faults in *King* and their assertion that Mann should not have created it to racism in the television industry. To them, white producers were telling black stories not because they had the proper authority to do so, but because it was part of the spoils of white privilege. In a column that included a portion

73 See Hillary Chura, "Cornelius Still on Track," *Advertising Age*, March 7, 2005, S-12.

74 Don Cornelius, "Unnoble Experiment That Failed," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 16, 1978.

75 Vernon Jarrett, "A Distorted View of Dr. King's Life," *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 1977.

76 Peters, "I'm Not Crying Over 'King,'" 7.

77 Rosetta M. James, "NBC's 'King,' Insulted, Distorted," *Amsterdam News*, March 11, 1978.

78 Ibid.

of Cornelius's letter, a *Philadelphia Tribune* writer connected *King's* ratings failure to the lack of black involvement in the project: "It was a show about Blacks, written, directed, produced, guided and misinterpreted by a massive technical staff of non-Blacks. Like a person with a foot ailment being treated by a dentist."⁷⁹ An *Amsterdam News* writer praised Abby Mann's struggle to get support for a movie about King. However, it troubled him that "Black writers are still just rounding the turn while Charlie races down the home stretch with scripts ready on our own heroes. And while we're bemoaning the fact, another natural—'The Adam Clayton Powell Story'—is getting ready for the cameras before we even unleash our pens or are tapped to do the story. How long, oh Lord, how long?"⁸⁰ By referring to the refrain "How long? Not long!" from King's speech after the march from Selma to Montgomery, the author invoked the civil rights struggle. Cornelius made a similar point:

Only Network Television (including CBS and ABC) would have the [gall] to do the story of a man who gave his life in pursuit of equal rights for blacks and to do that story with no black involvement in the writing, producing, and directing chores or even, would you believe, the musical score. . . . That's not mere discrimination but something far worse. That's Network Television. The last bastion of white supremacy in America.⁸¹

For many black commentators, the struggle for access to television production roles was part of an ongoing struggle for racial equality. This comparison cast networks as segregationist organizations that needed to be challenged to fully integrate black talent on-screen and behind the camera.

Black viewers as well as *King's* stars linked the miniseries with the struggle for more diverse representation on television. While writers in mainstream papers praised *King's* quality in contrast to lowbrow television, black observers contrasted the miniseries with what they considered to be stereotypical or "negative" representations of blacks. For television writers in the mainstream press, a quality program addressed serious themes. For black viewers, this was only part of the equation: the program also needed to represent blacks in a non-stereotypical way, with characters and situations they regarded as true to life or uplifting. In a *New York Times* interview, Cicely Tyson said, "What's needed for blacks is *balance*. . . . You have the 'Jane Pittmans,' the 'Roots,' the 'Kings,' but then you have a rash of nonsensical shows that have no meaning whatsoever," referring to *Good Times* (CBS, 1974–1979), *What's Happening!!* (ABC, 1976–1979), and *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975–1985), sitcoms that were widely accused of perpetuating black stereotypes.⁸² Similarly, the *Philadelphia Tribune* reviewer stated, "Somebody is surely going to have to tell NBC what's happening with Black viewers around this nation is not all what's found on the TV series 'What's Happening,'"⁸³ And in a rare example

79 Bill Lane, "No Black Input in 'King': A Subsequent Flop in the Ratings," *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 14, 1978.

80 Mel Tapley, "'King' Stirs Hornet's Nest," *Amsterdam News*, February 18, 1978. "Charlie," often phrased as "Mister Charlie," was a derisive term for the white male power structure.

81 Cornelius, "Unnoble Experiment That Failed."

82 John M. Wilson, "The Anguish of Reliving the Martin Luther King Drama," *New York Times*, February 12, 1978.

83 Lane, "No Black Input in 'King': A Subsequent Flop in the Ratings."

from a white writer, Wolcott of the *Village Voice* said he was glad that *King* aired, “if only to remind the American public that there is more to black life than the reactionary Tomming [in] *The Jeffersons*, *What’s Happening*, and *Baby I’m Back*.”⁸⁴ Aside from these derided sitcoms, black talent could get jobs in television movies about painful aspects of black history, but this genre was confining in its own way. A black interviewee in the *Los Angeles Times*, listing *Roots*, *The Fight Against Slavery* (BBC, 1975), *Minstrel Man* (CBS, 1977), and the forthcoming *Roots: The Next Generation* (ABC, 1979), said, “I’m tired of it. There comes a point when it just seems like capitalism operating at the expense of the blacks.”⁸⁵ And Cornelius said that *King*’s poor showing in the ratings “offers a bit of hope for some of us who are tired of having our culture and history exploited this way and who are not content with seeing good black acting talent sit around year after year waiting for another slavery picture to come along.”⁸⁶ The *King* controversy was seized as an opportunity to point out the persistence and even absurdity (like a dentist doing podiatry) of racist practices in the television industry.

Was It Too Soon for King? *King* was expected to do well in the ratings, especially after *Roots* was a ratings blockbuster. Several observers were dismayed, then, that *King* was outdone by the other shows in its time slot. CBS broadcast *Gator*, a 1976 action film starring and directed by Burt Reynolds. ABC aired the first installment of *How the West Was Won*, a twelve-part miniseries starring James Arness, formerly of *Gunsmoke* (CBS, 1955–1975). *King*’s first episode earned an 18 share (the percentage of homes using television that tuned into *King*), while *Gator* merited a 41 and *West* received a 36. In the era of Big Three network domination, *King*’s 18 share on the night of its premiere was a big failure. *King* drew more viewers on subsequent nights, but was still the lowest-ranking show for two of its three time slots.⁸⁷ That *King* flopped was a great surprise, and there were protracted efforts to explain it. The two reasons commonly given in the mainstream press were that the program was too highbrow (or the audience was too lowbrow), and that it was too soon for the audience to deal with the difficult issues presented in *King*. In the wake of *King*’s poor ratings, critics chastised the American public for failing to support quality programming. O’Connor of the *New York Times* said, “The mass audience may be in no mood for significance these days. At times, it can seem downright hostile to quality.”⁸⁸ The *Chicago Tribune*’s television critic lamented that “a skillfully crafted movie biography about one of our greatest Americans got swamped in the ratings by some of the most infantile programming on the air. The life story of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was defeated by ‘The Love Boat.’”⁸⁹

Some commentators depended upon a discourse of “sophistication” to explain the low ratings. NBC’s programming vice president, Paul Klein, rejected the idea that

84 Wolcott, “When We Dead Awaken,” 36. *Baby I’m Back* (CBS, 1978) was another black sitcom deemed “stereotypical.”

85 Lee Margulies, “‘King’: A Noble Experiment That Failed,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 1978.

86 Cornelius, “Unnoble Experiment That Failed.”

87 “Second-Season Bows Going to ABC, CBS; NBC Trailing,” *Broadcasting*, February 20, 1978, 21.

88 John J. O’Connor, “Was ‘King’ Too Much for the Audience?” *New York Times*, February 26, 1978.

89 Gary Deeb, “Nielsen Numbers Do ‘King’ an Injustice,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 16, 1978.

counterprogramming was the culprit. He pointed out that the Bob Hope special that preceded *King*'s second installment got high ratings, but that *King* only retained half of those viewers: "People couldn't get to their sets fast enough to change the channel."⁹⁰ Klein speculated that the real reason was that the (white) audience was split along class and educational lines:

This was a segmented audience show. . . . I believe it was very intensely viewed in the [economic] upper 20 percent of the population. . . . It got nothing in the other 80 percent. That's all that happened. We got everybody who read about "King" in advance. We got every literate human being in the United States. The people who watched "Gator" didn't watch it because they'd read about it. Working-class people watch working-class shows. They watch "Gator." They watch the s--- kickers.⁹¹

This statement was consistent with Klein's views about television audiences; a decade before chasing the "quality audience" was a popular practice in broadcast television, he was known for targeting educated middle-class viewers. Klein's argument here reinforced the idea that urban elites were looking for quality programming and that they were willing to deal with racial issues in a way that other Americans were not. Therefore, working-class and rural people ("shit kickers") deserved the blame for the show's failure, and for the persistence of racism as well. A letter to the *Los Angeles Times* connected race with taste in similar ways: "[King], the man who had been to the mountaintop, was placed in the abyss of the weekly Nielsen ratings. . . . H. L. Mencken used to talk about the 'boob-oisie.' Today, it seems we have our 'boob-tube-oisie.' King had a dream. White America is still tuned in to a moral nightmare of the usual TV fare."⁹²

In this discourse, failing to watch *King* was seen as a *refusal* to watch it. And the refusal to watch *King* was seen as a racist refusal to face racial content. According to Klein, black NBC employees were "horrified" by the ratings: "They couldn't believe it. They didn't know people still hated them."⁹³ One letter writer seems to confirm these fears when he equates seeing blacks on television in any context with having to confront blacks' "demands for righting a '200-year-old wrong.'" The writer suspected that *King* failed because like him, most (white) viewers were exhausted by civil rights: "Equal rights, affirmative action, black politicians wanting more and more. They had the sympathy of the average person for a while, now everybody is getting tired of it. When I turn my TV on and the picture is full of black faces, I immediately change channels, and I think most others do, too."⁹⁴ These letters and Klein's comments resonate with Todd Gitlin's finding that *King*'s ratings failure challenged the network practice of concept testing, which involves asking test subjects in advance if they would watch a program about a certain topic. Because *King*'s concept was successful with

90 Tom Shales, "Why the TV Audience Tuned Out on 'King.'" *Washington Post*, February 22, 1978.

91 Ibid.

92 Gene and Rhona Rothman, Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1978.

93 Shales, "Why the TV Audience Tuned Out on 'King.'"

94 Don Wallace, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1978.

potential viewers, networks became wary of using concept testing with highbrow topics. According to Gitlin, the tests produced biased results because viewers “want[ed] to see themselves, and be seen, as the kind of people who would watch a miniseries about Martin Luther King.”⁹⁵ Klein seemed shocked by the ratings and what they implied about race, but an account by NBC’s talent manager at the time suggests that early on, the network had concerns about *King*’s ability to draw white viewers. According to the talent manager, when *King* was in development, the network’s head of programming was so worried about *King*’s crossover appeal that he wanted boxer Muhammad Ali in the lead role, saying he was the only black person who could deliver high ratings.⁹⁶

King’s failure was repeatedly contrasted with the success of *Roots*; the conclusion was that the recentness of the civil rights movement was the most troubling racial aspect of *King*. A producer from *Roots* argued that unlike with *Roots*, viewers could vividly remember the events in *King*.⁹⁷ O’Connor echoed the sentiment:

Only one thing is evident: “Jane Pittman” and “Roots,” for all their elements of pain and violence, were basically upbeat tales of triumph and survival, but “King,” resurrecting bitter scenes from the 50s and 60s, had to end painfully with the murder of a great leader. . . . In its effort to be powerful and provocative, “King” may have been too successful at a time when the mass audience apparently doesn’t want to be overpowered or provoked. The events and people of “King” are still too vividly close. James Arness—in a stunningly photographed West that probably never was—is considerably easier to consume before bedtime.⁹⁸

But *King* wasn’t just disturbing: its emotional power threatened to make white viewers feel guilty. Several commentators said so explicitly. As one television producer observed, “With ‘Roots’ we were looking back into history; we were not part of that. . . . With Martin Luther King, the wound is still open. We feel guilty about it; we feel buffeted by it. I think people just said, ‘Hey enough. We don’t want to see it.’”⁹⁹

Blacks showed some reluctance as well, but instead of guilt, sadness and dread were the dominant emotions. A retiree interviewed at a Harlem restaurant said, “I know the story, I knew the man. . . . I figured they’d show all this stuff about Montgomery, Alabama, and it would just turn my stomach: sickening dogs on people, turning water hoses on women and children. I didn’t want to see it.” The restaurant’s cook said *King* made him feel “very, very sad,” sadder than he felt with *Roots*. He added, “It also made me feel bitter, and I don’t like to feel that way, either.”¹⁰⁰ The miniseries was seen as a learning experience or an important reminder about black history, even though it was

95 Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 46–47.

96 Joe Scully, “Have You Ever—You Know?” *Emmy*, June 1991, 78. The unnamed programming executive is most likely a predecessor of Klein’s. Scully said the casting request was leaked, and NAACP officers wrote to NBC asking them to represent King respectfully.

97 Margulies, “‘King’: A Noble Experiment That Failed.”

98 O’Connor, “Was ‘King’ Too Much for the Audience?”

99 Margulies, “‘King’: A Noble Experiment That Failed.”

100 Carey Winfrey, “\$5 Million TV Documentary Show Is Regarded as a Ratings Disaster,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1978.

upsetting. An interviewee from a different news story said, “I enjoyed it—it made me mad again.”¹⁰¹ Another viewer said the movie made him realize that what King was fighting for hadn’t been fully realized yet: “There’ve been laws, and they’ve found ways to evade them. As they say, you can’t legislate the mind.”¹⁰²

Generally, blacks didn’t espouse the “too soon” discourse. They tended to say that *King*’s timing was right for the social context because it highlighted historical and continuing discrimination. For them, *King* was a call for continued vigilance against racism. A *Baltimore Afro-American* columnist said:

The film came at a good time. A time when black people seem to be experiencing a backlash from this and a backlash from that. A time when black people seem to be complacent. A time when black people obviously think that the struggle for justice and for equality is all behind us and a time when blacks think they have no further need for civil rights organizations.¹⁰³

The Louisville Defender, a black paper, did a *vox populi* feature on *King*; four of the eight responses were unequivocally positive, and all positive comments asserted that the miniseries was an important reminder about King and the movement.¹⁰⁴ This emphasis on *King* as a successful program could be found in other black press news and feature articles as well. This represented a significant departure from the columns in those same publications. In conjunction with the reasons for columnists’ sympathies with the SCLC, this difference can be attributed to the fact that respondents were usually young adults, who had fewer memories of the movement and a different take on it. Young people were interviewed about *King* because anxieties about the legacy of the civil rights struggle often involved the fear that black youth didn’t know or care about the movement, and that they were squandering their hard-won opportunities. So, portraying them as watching and enjoying *King* (instead of ignoring it) reflected an investment in an enduring King legacy and a hope that the youth would learn more about and continue the struggle.

The “too soon” question assumed that the miniseries failed, but the story turned out to be more complicated than this. Two months after *King* aired, several newspapers ran an Associated Press (AP) report on a single aspect of the Nielsen ratings: While the miniseries was watched in fewer than 10 percent of white homes, it was seen in 66 percent of nonwhite homes.¹⁰⁵ These data complicate the very notion of *King* as a “failure” and are further evidence of the importance of race in the reception of the program. Despite the fact that the AP story challenged much of what had been assumed about the audience for this miniseries, none of the newspapers expanded on it. It was the coda to months of controversy about race, representation, and *King*.

101 “Blacks Enjoy ‘King’ with Reservations,” *St. Louis American*, February 16, 1978.

102 Ibid.

103 Lillian Wiggins, “Blacks Have Always Been Written Out of History,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 25 1978, 7.

104 Buck Conner, “Defender Photo Survey,” *Louisville Defender*, February 23, 1978, 4.

105 “Few White Households Watched Show on King,” *New York Times*, April 17, 1978.

Conclusion. On broadcast television, the docudrama is no longer the symbol of “quality” that it was in the late 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, the genre became synonymous with “sleazy” content, such as movies about famous murder cases or sex scandals. Historical docudrama is now primarily the domain of premium cable channels, which use the genre to bolster the marketing claim that they privilege “quality” over ratings.¹⁰⁶ However, debates about the representational codes of fact and fiction continue to play out in criticism of reality television.

What has persisted since 1978 is a profound investment in how Martin Luther King, Jr., is represented, and the stance that “misrepresentations” are dangerous. The controversy around Abernathy’s 1989 autobiography *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, which included stories about King’s sexual adventures, mirrored the SCLC campaign against King in many ways. The notion of a minister and American hero having an extramarital affair was scandalous in its own right, but for decades people who opposed King had been using his rumored “immorality” as a way to discredit him. Because Abernathy’s book confirmed such rumors, he was charged with helping to destroy King’s image. Abernathy’s defense was similar to Mann’s: he loved King and wanted to show how he was as a person—not just as an icon.¹⁰⁷ Representations deemed “irreverent” continue to be highly controversial. In 2002, civil rights activists and King’s daughter Bernice led criticism of the black-cast film *Barbershop* (Tim Story, 2002), which included a character whose outrageous comments included the declaration that “Martin Luther King was a ‘ho.’”¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, people who cleaved to King’s antipoverty messages raised eyebrows at the use of his image to sell Apple computers and Alltel wireless telephone service in the late 1990s, even though that use was authorized by the King family.

The SCLC campaign against King was overreaching, but black observers had legitimate concerns about what a viewer-friendly version of King and the movement would look like. The notion of who King was within American popular culture, as opposed to what he meant to blacks or to certain cities, was just developing in 1978. Thirty years later, the discourse of “King’s dream” has achieved hegemony. However, the cost has been that we view King as a nonthreatening idealist who wanted racial harmony and “colorblindness,” and who was opposed to “obsession” over race. This hegemonic image of King is not universally accepted; it has led some blacks to reject him and others to assert his revolutionary aspects.¹⁰⁹ Confirming Trouillot’s formulation of the “contingent but necessary” need to distinguish history from fiction, controversies about how to portray King show that claims to “authority” and “accuracy” are capricious, but abiding. *

106 The genre is still occasionally controversial. For example, in 2003, conservatives argued that the upcoming CBS miniseries *The Reagans* was a liberal smear of President Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan. As a result of the criticism, CBS sent the miniseries to the Showtime cable channel.

107 Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You*, 156. Dyson uses this story to reflect on criticisms that he himself received for writing about King’s flaws and for being critical of the King family.

108 Sharon Tubbs, “Does ‘Barbershop’ Cut Too Close?” *St. Petersburg Times*, October 7, 2002. The term “‘ho” (whore) asserts that King was promiscuous.

109 Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You*, 1–29.