

“I Wish I Had A Time Machine”: Looking B[*l*]ackward at ABC’s *The Wonder Years* (2021) through the Recuperation of Black Public Memory & Afro-Nostalgia

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*The last few years have been marked with several media programs that travel back in time to color the past, give contrast to its picture, and widen the frame constraining the overexposed image of American life in the 1960s, particularly in the South for Black families. In 2021, ABC released the reboot of the 1980s television show *The Wonder Years* (2021) featuring the Williamses, a Black middle-class family living in Alabama during the late 1960s. The young boy protagonist, Dean Williams, uses living memory to insert, highlight, and center real moments in American history with Black voices and experiences. Using bell hooks’ oppositional gaze, Badia Ahad-Legardy’s Afro-nostalgia, and Critical Race Theory’s (CRT) counterstorytelling, we posit that living memory for Black audiences exists with and beyond the immovable, oft untouchable earthy materials of museums, historical markers, street signage, and popular speeches. Further, we argue that the remaking of Black American scenes in popular culture is an intentional recuperation of Black public memory, a necessary revival for the advancement of contemporary Black resistance. This retelling uses stories of color and in color to produce a living public memory that contests the incomplete, hegemonic narratives of past and present.*

Keywords: Afro-Nostalgia, Black Public Memory, Oppositional Gaze, Television, *The Wonder Years* (2021)

Entertaining the Time Machine and Romancing History

We open this essay with an excerpt from the 2021 film *Reminiscence*, starring Hugh Jackman, which tells the story of Nick Bannister, a white memory engineer whose machine enables its guests to submerge their bodies and minds into the living memory of their own lives.

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The past can haunt a man . . . And the past is just a series of moments. Each one, perfect. Complete. A bead on the necklace of time. The past doesn't haunt us. Wouldn't even recognize us. If there are ghosts to be found, it's us who haunt the past. It used to be you couldn't go back again. But time is no longer a one-way stream. Memory is the boat that sails against its current. And I'm the oarsman. When the waters rose and war broke out... there wasn't a lot to look forward to... so people began looking back. Nostalgia's become a way of life. But for Watts and me, it's a living.¹

The comfort of memories is one thing, but to revisit them for clarity and close-ups adds another layer to the tangibility of memory. While this film permits a heartbroken lover to exchange his future for the inescapable past, Black American characters on screen are rarely afforded this opportunity. The chance to recolor the past with contrast and to color-correct the romantic nature of modern American life is often not enjoyable for those who were painted over in the time machines of history books and popular culture, those rendered invisible. Moreover, televised Black memories lack the luxury of going back in time to erase racist histories or relive the joys and pleasures of American life. Badia Ahad-Legardy explains by saying that “historical nostalgia, with respect to African American memory, is rarely (if ever) invoked, precisely because narratives of Black subjugation and disenfranchisement do not easily mesh with the romantic wistfulness generally associated with nostalgia.”² Presently, Black memories are typically constructed and replayed by the cultural producers of our current time, using youthful perspectives, Afrofuturism, Black brilliance in STEAM, and current events to make real the existence and persistence of Black life and living. A cursory look at recent television programming shows us how Black media recuperates and revives memory within its living audiences.

In this essay, we focus on *The Wonder Years* (2021) to analyze the ways that Black public memory provides inventional resources for conjuring counterhegemonic understandings of historic, racialized events in the U.S. We ultimately argue that the show invokes Afro-nostalgia to constitute its Black viewing publics, urging them into a participatory process of community meaning-making that is dependent on the unique cultural resources of Black Americans. We assert that *The Wonder Years* reboot depends on dominant public memory for its content, while at the same time produces a resistive lived experience that we understand as Black public memory, which is shaped and reshaped through Afro-nostalgia, oppositional gaze, and counterstorytelling.

With Montgomery, Alabama as the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movements, *The Wonder Years*' (2021) choice of placing its story here is infused with cultural and historical knowledge around the importance of location for its series. The original series takes place in Long Island in the late 1960s while the reboot allows its viewers to reconsider their understanding of the impacts of the movement on Black American families living in the U.S. South. With 30 years between the premiere of *The Wonder Years* (1988) and its reboot in 2021, we grapple with what differences in the popular (his)story may be more apparent because of its network, character choice and city choice. Additionally, by reconstructing the face of the series, viewers are placed at the center of boycotts, sit-ins, and slow policy changes that made Black life in Alabama. Black southerners had endured a decade of assassinations and intentional murders including Emmett Till in 1955, Medgar Evers and President John F. Kennedy in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965, and Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr in 1968. They had also been privy to the continued Jane- and Jim Crow laws that perpetuated the racial separation of Americans living in the South. Montgomery is the

¹ *Reminiscence*, directed by Lisa Joy (Warner Brothers Pictures, 2021), 1:16.

² Badia Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

birthplace of the bus boycott that intentionally placed Rosa Parks at the face of that particular movement. *The Wonder Years* (2021) reboot positions viewers to potentially engage with the cultural richness that is Montgomery for Black Americans in the ways that other dominant cultures grasped to the original series in Long Island.

Introducing *The Wonder Years* (2021)

ABC's 2021 television reboot *The Wonder Years* uses juxtaposition to set up a direct comparison of the political and social events of 1968 to those of today. The pilot episode features a narration by 12-year-old protagonist Dean Williams, who observes, "There was a presidential election that created a racial divide, and there was a flu pandemic that they said would kill a million people around the world."³ Contemporary viewers may well be shocked to hear the resonances between those bygone years and our own. The animosity of the 1968 presidential contest between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey marked the end of Democrats' New Deal coalition and the solidification of white identity politics in the re-aligning Republican party.⁴ At the same time, the 1968 flu pandemic spread across the globe, ravaging families for two years.⁵ Also that year, Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination rocked the nation, not unlike the 2020 police killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed. The turbulent '60s, it seems, haunt the present just as we haunt it.

The Wonder Years (2021) trades on this premise by inviting contemporary audiences of Black racial backgrounds to indulge in nostalgia for the particular joys of Southern Black family life. The show also allows audiences of different racial backgrounds to be educated about the omnipresence and complexity of racism and racial animosity during this critical time in U.S. history. Unlike its predecessor *The Wonder Years* (1988), which followed the travails of a white 12-year-old boy and his white middle-class family in suburban America in 1968, we argue that the 2021 reboot centers the experiences of a Black Alabamian family in order to contest dominant (white) public memories of family life during the era. Doing so is important, for it provides the often-absent opportunity for Black viewers to construct, contest, and marinate in collective memories of the era, historic memories marked by both racial trauma *and* community and familial pride. In resisting the dominant impulse to whitewash one of the most racially divisive moments in recent U.S. history, we argue that *The Wonder Years* (2021) encourages audiences to understand the 1960s not as a monolithic struggle for peace, equality, and normalcy, but as an era where anti-Blackness framed the most seemingly banal daily interactions.⁶ At the same time, the show provides a comforting, nostalgic look at the joys and pleasures of Black life, highlighting the ways in which Black culture and family life transcended struggle and made room for resistance. Importantly, these rhetorical moves are enacted using the comedy genre. Indeed, major networks like ABC often use comedy and dramedies to make topics of race more palatable to their racially mixed

³ *The Wonder Years*, 1, "Pilot," produced by Lee Daniels, aired September 22, 2021, on ABC, <https://www.hulu.com/series/the-wonder-years-dc8c5d8f-6934-461a-8a43-ee645c6f0b0c>.

⁴ Jeremy D. Mayer, "Nixon Rides the Backlash to Victory: Racial Politics in the 1968 Presidential Campaign," *The Historian* 64, no. 2 (2001): 351-366.

⁵ Trevor Hoppe, "'Spanish Flu': When Infectious Disease Names Blur Origins and Stigmatize Those Infected," *American Journal of Public Health* 108, no. 11 (2018): 1462-1464.

⁶ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 386.

demographics⁷. Using the comedy genre as a site of rhetorical interrogation, we take on the necessary project of centering Black resistance and triumph amid struggle. Doing so is important because, as Catherine Squires argues, “the social hierarchy of race encourages the erasure of Black resistance and ingenuity.”⁸ Thus, mediated projects of Black public memory have the potential to guard against such erasures.

Within rhetorical studies, public memory scholarship has located certain spaces and places as rich with possibility for doing rhetorical work on matters of public significance; museums, monuments, statues, tours, cemeteries, historical markers, and even films are common points of study, especially for analyzing the ways that racial identities are constituted, contested, and excluded.⁹ Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian Ott make the case that collective identity is necessarily enmeshed with projects that analyze sites of public memory, contending that public memories “matter” for publics that are “legitimated rhetorically.”¹⁰ In being hailed by discourse, group members forge a sense of common identity, which aids in building communal belonging, and eventually, spurring collective action on matters of public import.¹¹ Similarly, Kendall Phillips suggests that the rhetorical constituting of publics is key to the doing of public memory.¹² Indeed, he explains “public memories serve as a horizon within which a public finds itself, constitutes itself, and deliberates its own existence.”¹³ Importantly, this process is rife with contestation and negotiation, especially for marginalized groups. Phillips points toward “the struggle of publics to assert their memories, the negative reaction of other publics to such assertions, and the rhetorical struggle involved in these contests.”¹⁴ Such struggles and contestations might be no more pronounced than in those involving race, counterpublics, and tumultuous historical events.

Recent scholarship on public memory and race contends that mainstream public memorials—those assuming a more racially and politically homogenous notion of the American public—often cater to the hegemonic preferences of white identities and exclude counterhegemonic perspectives. For example, Daniel DuPont notes southern museums in the U.S. that depict antebellum history often rhetorically construct narratives vindicating and valorizing white men while they neglect the stories and contributions of women and people of color.¹⁵ Similarly, Kristan Poirot argues that the

⁷ Aaryn L. Green and Annulla Linders, “The Impact of Comedy On Racial and Ethnic Discourse,” *Sociological Inquiry* 86, no. 2 (2016): 241-269.

⁸ Catherine R. Squires, “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres,” *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (2002): 446-468.

⁹ For example, see the following: Christopher A. House, “Remembering Jim Crow in the Age of Trump: An Analysis of the Rhetorical Functions of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 7, no. 1 (2017); Kristan Poirot and Shevaun E. Watson, “Memories of Freedom and White Resilience: Place, Tourism, and Urban Slavery,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2015): 91-116; Deborah F. Atwater and Sandra L. Herndon, “Cultural Space and Race: The National Civil Rights Museum and MuseumAfrica,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 14 (2003): 16-19.

¹⁰ Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott, “Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place” in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, eds. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blaire, and Brian L. Ott (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 17.

¹¹ Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, “Introduction,” 17.

¹² Kendall Phillips, “Introduction.” In *Framing Public Memory*, edited by Kendall R. Phillips, Stephen Howard Browne, Barbara Biesecker, Barbie Zelizer, and Charles E. Morris (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 6.

¹³ Phillips, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁴ Phillips, “Introduction,” 5.

¹⁵ Daniel DuPont, “Public Memory and the Fate of Objects from a Racist Past.” Paper presented at the *Research Seminar in Archives & Cultural Heritage* at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, August 24, 2016. <https://medium.com/@heypaula/public-memory-and-the-fate-of-objects-from-a-racist-past-3452f8b7f2f9>.

public memory constructed in exhibits at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute not only evinces the “woman problem” of women’s exclusion from social movement narratives but also highlights the ways in which racism-conscious memory projects can rely “on place, violence, and masculinity to animate a relationship between exigency and response.”¹⁶ Even in seemingly resistive acts of public memorialization like these, the tendency toward hegemonic thought reigns, as does the re-inscription of white-friendly, palatable public memories about racist events.

Kristin Hoerl tackles this very problem in her analysis of the public memories circulated after the release of the 1988 dramatic film *Mississippi Burning*, which catalogs the FBI investigations following the 1964 murders of George Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman during the now well-known Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. Although the film was intended to educate the public about the event, which was less publicly represented in the popular imagination of the time, Hoerl shows how the narrative and the journalistic responses to it enabled cinematic amnesia to take form. Such cinematic amnesia “ultimately reinforced the legitimacy of White hegemony and obscured the perspectives of civil rights activists.”¹⁷ Thus, we might say that public memory projects involving race, especially those involving white supremacy, are uniquely prone to erasures and omissions that have undesirable effects in the present. In other words, as Edward Casey notes, public memory is both attached to a past (typically an originating event of some sort) and acts to ensure a future of further remembering of that same event.”¹⁸

While this challenge presents itself, the participation of Black audiences, in acting as counterpublics hailed by these discourses, provides an avenue for self-reflection and broader cultural repair. For example, Ersula Ore has described the contemporary Black public’s tendency to rhetorically equate Trayvon Martin’s murder with Emmett Till’s. This form of Black public memory creates “a critical democratic literacy specific to the condition of being Black in America, how Blacks use memory to negotiate the present, and a way of deliberating with others that reflects an attunement to ‘ethical evaluations of the past’ and ‘living engagement with the past.’”¹⁹ Crucially, this is the central project of Black public memory, to enable ethical engagements with the past, especially as they influence the present.

To meaningfully analyze the Black public memories conjured in *The Wonder Years* (2021), we look to theories of the Black public sphere and Black public memory to gain the linguistic tools necessary to evaluate the ways in which the cultural particularities of our subject bear on our larger endeavor. Rhetorician and media scholar Catherine Squires argues that the Black public sphere functions in a unique way to highlight the lived, racialized experiences of diverse Black publics in the U.S. media ecosystem.²⁰ Specifically, she suggests that we theorize marginalized public spheres as producing three different kinds of rhetorical responses—enclave, counterpublic, and satellite—which equip us to offer a richer description of the rhetorical activities undertaken by non-dominant groups appealing to different kinds of audiences. In this essay, we suggest that *The*

¹⁶ Kristan Poirot, “Gendered Geographies of Memory: Place, Violence, and Exigency at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18, no. 4 (2015): 624.

¹⁷ Kristin Hoerl, “Burning Mississippi into Memory? Cinematic Amnesia as a Resource for Remembering Civil Rights,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1 (2009): 56.

¹⁸ Edward S. Casey, “Public Memory in Place and Time,” in *Framing Public Memory*, edited by Kendall R. Phillips, Stephen Howard Browne, Barbara Biesecker, Barbie Zelizer, and Charles E. Morris. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 17.

¹⁹ Ersula Ore, *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 7.

²⁰ Squires, “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere,” 448.

Wonder Years (2021) engages the second of Squires' categories, counterpublic, to explain the rhetorical workings of the Black public sphere as it locates, contests, and makes meaning out of the racist events of 1968. Because "different public spheres will have access to different resources and will forge different relationships to the state and dominant publics,"²¹ theorizing the particularities of the Black public sphere (and, by extension, Black public memory) is a significant endeavor in adding to scholarly repertoires concerned with counterhegemonic renderings of public matters.

As such, a particularized definition of Black public memory within the Black public sphere is appropriate. We posit that Black public memory is not only constructed in the solid and immovable (such as monuments, museums, and historical markers) but also in the media texts that revisit and remake Black collective memories through public discourses of audience reception to mass media. We use Winfield's work to interrogate Black public memory, which she defines as "the intangible collection of constructed reckonings of historical events, altered by dominant and minoritized groups in their retelling of Black people's roles, impacts, and consequences."²² Using the word "intangible," Winfield argues that the production of media stories like those seen in *The Wonder Years* (2021) retell and re-present American history, placing the act and practice of memory-making with its audiences who are offered a counternarrative through palatable, family entertainment. The media text is material, but the rhetorical uptake of it by Black audiences is less so. For Black audiences, these memories circulate in the mass media and are shaped by "familial storytelling, curriculum, and commemorative acts that recall the event that shaped the Black American experience, often punctuated by specific historical eras (e.g., slavery, the antebellum South, Jim Crow, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement)."²³ In this way, Black public memory is fundamentally intersubjective and rhetorical; it relies on co-constructed reflections of shared and imagined experiences that resonate with different Black publics, united by a sense of shared community grounded in specific times and places. For Black publics, collective memory is drawn from a shared reservoir of cultural resources specific to Black Americans.

Indeed, Black public memory functions through the active participation of Black audiences who pull upon what bell hooks calls the "oppositional gaze" to contest hegemonic representations of identity and construct alternative futures.²⁴ These oppositional gazes form the basis for what becomes methodologically known as "counterstorytelling," which is a practice of critical race theory (CRT) involving the purposeful "challenging [of] the assumptions and logic of stories that ultimately work to reinforce racial domination at the epistemic, spiritual, and material dimensions of dehumanization."²⁵ *The Wonder Years* (2021) functions via counterstorytelling by giving Black audiences the mediated tools necessary to construct a collective memory of the 60s that is attentive

²¹ Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere," 448.

²² Asha S. Winfield, "I Don't See Myself: Exploring Reception to Hollywood's Construction of Memory through Black Women's Biopics," PhD Diss., (Texas A&M University, 2021). To our knowledge, no communication or memory studies scholars have provided a specific definition of "Black public memory." However, the term does appear in Aric Putnam's "Ethiopia is Now: JA Rogers and the Rhetoric of Black Anticolonialism During the Great Depression," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2007): 437, in reference to Dexter Gordon's work on Black Nationalism and Black rhetors in the nineteenth century. Although he doesn't use the term "Black public memory," Theon Hill's "Sanitizing the Struggle: Barack Obama, Selma, and Civil Rights Memory," *Communication Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2017): 354-376 makes the case that memory for Black audiences surrounding the Civil Rights movement functions in a culturally specific manner.

²³ Winfield, "I Don't See Myself," 15.

²⁴ bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black female spectators," In *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

²⁵ Denise Taliaferro Baszile, "Rhetorical Revolution: Critical Race Counterstorytelling and the Abolition of White Democracy," *Qualitative Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (2015): 239-249.

to both the struggles and triumphs of Black family life during the era. Freed from the constraints of hegemonic white gazes, the show achieves a portrayal of Black family life that enables the development of a plethora of diverse Black subjectivities—especially those marked by joy. The impact of these processes is a living memory that pulses with a vigor unique to the experiences of Black American audiences, a living memory that is well explained as an exercise in Afro-nostalgia.

Afro-Nostalgia and Looking B[|]ackward as Practices of Counterstorytelling

What is the role of nostalgia in constituting counterhegemonic stories about Black family life? How can a framework centered on the rhetorical work of nostalgia in public discourse be useful for explaining the specific experiences of Black Americans in the U.S. media landscape, especially within the context of public memory studies? Can Black experiences be remembered and recuperated even in the wake of historical erasure, forgetting, and silencing? And, if Black memory can be recuperated, then what can Black audiences gain from doing so? Badia Ahad-Legardy offers tentative answers to these questions as she theorizes the role of Afro-nostalgia in contemporary popular culture, answers that resonate with previous scholarship on the role of affect in memory studies.

Ahad-Legardy makes the timely case that Black memories, while often relegated to the prison of trauma by current cultural producers, should not be confined there. While she affirms the significance of historical violence to the Black experience, she offers an addendum to the limits of that framework, suggesting in its place a theory that accounts for the production of joyous feelings that characterize many contemporary exercises in Black memory.²⁶ The focus on feeling, theorized through affect, is important because it opens spaces for interrogating how Black audiences engage in historical pleasure through looking, even in the face of trauma. Building on Raymond Williams' notion of "structures of feeling," Afro-nostalgia acknowledges how affect does not merely denote an individual's psychic reaction to a text but points toward collective community responses that are deeply rooted.²⁷ Such a communal focus forms the basis for resistance through gazing. Ahad-Legardy explains that "contemporary African American artists deploy nostalgic memory to reframe traumatic relationships to black historical narratives as well as to disrupt both white supremacist and Black neoliberal narratives that have claimed the nostalgic past as their own."²⁸ As a form of oppositional gaze, Afro-nostalgia authorizes a defiant, collective rebuilding of shared past experiences in order to produce an affect of joy that powers present and future movements of solidarity. In this framework, trauma is still present, but it is bookended by the political and social longevity of happiness. Importantly, Dickinson, Blair, and Ott have acknowledged the power that theories of affect have on understanding public memory. They contend that if public memory studies requires locating "what sticks," then attending to the economy of emotions that accompany memory excursions is needed. They suggest that the project of public memory should be to "understand how particular memories capture the imagination and produce attachments" such as "pride, contempt, anxiety, anger, horror, shame, guilt, confidence, gratitude [and] compassion."²⁹ While many public memory studies acknowledge the negative feelings associated with traumatic events, like slavery, the Civil War, or Jim Crow, fewer illuminate the liberating, resistive capacity

²⁶ Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia*, 3-4.

²⁷ Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia*, 5.

²⁸ Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia*, 6.

²⁹ Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 15-16.

of joyous feelings produced through counterpublic nostalgia. Thus, *The Wonder Years* (2021) provides an auspicious case study for Afro-nostalgia in popular media because it offers audiences a dimensional counterstory of the 1960s through the lenses of Black joy found in youth and family, doing so without extinguishing the flames of racial trauma.

To acknowledge and extend the theoretical work done on counterstorytelling, oppositional gazes, and Afro-nostalgia, we use the term *b[l]ackward* as an intentional lens and tool for examining Blackness or Black identity in contemporary popular media. Looking b[l]ackward in this context means to locate Black [counter]stories, lived experiences, and resistance in historical discourses in the recuperation of Black public memory. Looking b[l]ackward is to gaze with culturally informed critical speculation about the past in order to articulate how media producers apply, erase, or racially situate Blackness for mass audiences. Moreover, looking b[l]ackward implies a unique engagement with the cultural specificities of Black American life that provide the resources for community remembering, characterized by a feeling of group belongingness. This feeling of belongingness, as Dickinson, Blair, and Ott attest, functions as the “affiliative mode of public memory [that is] *felt and legitimated rhetorically*.”³⁰

How Memory Works in Television

In mass media, Black historical stories, both fictional and non-fictional, have been altered by the political economy of production companies and dominant hegemonic ideologies, shaping and reshaping the public memory of certain groups by erasing some actors in major events and minimizing the impact of others.³¹ While the media provide opportunities for seeing, gazing, questioning, and critiquing based on historical knowledge, they also trouble common knowledge with different racial truths. According to Joe Feagin, “how we interpret and experience our racialized present depends substantially on our knowledge of and interpretations of our racialized past. The collective memory of that racist past not only shapes, but legitimates, the established racial structure of today’s society.”³² In short, *The Wonder Years* (2021) takes stories that are important to American families and gives them a Black-centered perspective by invoking a culturally-relevant approach to learning/teaching with and from mass media. Specifically, the show uses the politicized spaces of the sports field, the living room, and the classroom to conjure up memories and to counter the dominant narratives of the time.

Rhetorical Analysis

The Sports Field and Living Room

I feel different everywhere I go, no matter who I’m around. And I know I’ll always be different. But when I’m with Cory and Brad and we all feel different, I finally get to feel the same as everybody else. That’s why I want to play. (Dean, Episode 1: Pilot)³³

In the pilot episode, the spaces of the sports field and the living room function to humanize and personalize the Black community’s responses to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination by

³⁰ Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, “Introduction,” 17.

³¹ Winfield, “I Don’t See Myself.”

³² Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counterframing* (New York: Routledge, 2013). 17.

³³ *The Wonder Years*, “Pilot.”

exploring the affective weight of the tragic event and subsequent TV news report. Acknowledging that the crisis, while undoubtedly traumatic, can feel abstract and impersonal for white liberals, the episode highlights how Black families' reactions to the tragedy encompass more than a distanced shock and awe. Instead, the scenes focus on the polysemic responses to King's death in order to resist hegemonic impulses to essentialize Black feelings. The dominant affective theme of mourning is developed in nuanced, variable ways, highlighting the messiness of trauma, memory, and communal coping. At the same time, the episode makes space for joy and community bonding.

The Williams family learns of King's death while attending a first-of-its-kind interracial baseball game for 7th grade boys—the local Black team against the white team from across town. During the game, a heated argument about Dean's performance at the plate ensues between Dean's father and the team's coach. As the two men escalate the disagreement from the coaching of the game to past personal grievances with each other, the Black families in the stands exchange uncomfortable glances with one another, as if to say, “Cut it out, especially in front of the opposing team.”³⁴ Dean's mother eventually walks up in an attempt to calm the waters, transforming the argument into a tripartite spectacle. Just as Dean's mother chides the men for “showing [their] ass in front of these white folks,” a white couple approaches the trio on the field. Tentatively, they volunteer “I'm sorry—we just heard what happened.”³⁵ Absorbing the news of the assassination, the coach and Dean's parents have the wind knocked out of them.

Of note is the community concern about performances of Blackness and Black feelings in front of white people. Historically, these concerns have relegated Black anger, dissent, and opposition in-house, away from the eyes of prying white publics who may be looking for opportunities to discard and discredit Black freedom struggles.³⁶ Indeed, respectability politics in front of white people has commonly dictated the performance of composure and decorum, even in the most uncivil of situations. The Black families' initial speechlessness upon hearing the news of King's murder underscores the difficulty of managing collective feelings in public. What will white people think if they see and hear screams and cries across the baseball field? Will Black feelings be recognized as just, righteous, and worthy of respect? At the center of these concerns, too, we find young Dean, a 7th-grader who is clearly upset about King's murder but who also, like all middle school boys, is distracted by his own youthful predicaments, e.g. securing the romantic attention of his friend Keisa. For Dean, mourning is learned through observation as he gets hints from family and friends of the severity of the tragedy. In the community, there are many responses to the assassination, some ordered by the centrality of white gazes on Black life, others ordered by collective sensemaking among in-group members, like those detailed below.

The dominant (white) public recollection of King's assassination makes room for audiences to understand the multiplicity of responses from Black Americans. No doubt, the Black community's performances of collective grieving and mourning make sense within the primary memory frameworks available. However, that grief is not totalizing. King's death did not (and does not) explain all of Black suffering, nor does it necessarily capture the primary struggles that different Black individuals were experiencing at the time of the assassination. For example, Dean's concern with gaining Kesia's attention reminds us that Black life did not (and does not) revolve solely around Civil Rights projects; instead, Black life is marked by the general and holistic human experience,

³⁴ *The Wonder Years*, “Pilot.”

³⁵ *The Wonder Years*, “Pilot.”

³⁶ Ta-nehisi Coates meditates on this issue in “Fear of a Black President,” *The Atlantic*, September 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/09/fear-of-a-black-president/309064/>.

punctuated by moments of joy, grief, and community/cultural bonding. Thus, while dominant public memory might imagine King's assassination to account for all (or most) Black feelings, the Black public memory offered in this episode invites a resistive, more broadly encompassing interpretation that constructs Black people as human, conflicted and complicated; imperfect, yet resilient.

The following scene expands available memory frameworks by examining the polysemy of Black mourning, particularly as it is evinced for young Black adults. In the scene, the Williams family gathers around the evening television broadcast as Walter Cronkite relays the events of the day to the viewing audience and world. His familiar voice echoes, "Good evening. Dr. Martin Luther King, the apostle of non-violence in the Civil Rights Movement, has been shot to death in Memphis, Tennessee. Police have issued an all-points bulletin for a well-dressed young white man seen running from the scene."³⁷ Cronkite's voice fades into the background as the camera redirects our attention toward the family on the couch, visibly stricken with grief. In the two brief scenes that follow, Dean's mother quietly maintains composure by preoccupying herself with household chores. Her tears are hidden from her children, but the close-up allows the audience to feel myriad emotions she may be experiencing. In the next shots, Dean's older teen sister, Kim, stares at a picture of her grandfather in a military uniform. The shot tilts down and a collection of books is presented. Kim pushes the SAT preparation book aside to reveal the then-popular book *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, a political activist and early leader of the Black Panther Party. As the scene concludes, a cover of Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come," a staple in the Black music community during past and present Black freedom movements, plays.³⁸

Kim's flirtation with radical Black politics provides a significant vantage point to understanding Black mourning in this moment. For Kim and some of her peers, the Black community's response to King's murder *must* be political. They are convicted that, without a systemically-targeted, organized, politics-conscious outcome, the tyranny of white supremacy will continue. Her choice to turn to the words of Eldridge Cleaver, in this particular time, highlights the centrality of Black leftist organizing to the struggle against racism and the importance of cultivating a sustainable, lasting hope for transformative Black politics. While her parents and neighbors continue to mourn through tears and collective community building within the neighborhood and local church, Kim's choice to look upward toward the macrostructures of inequality underscores the ways that many civically-minded young Black Americans engaged this tumultuous moment in history. Indeed, the show further explores Kim's political dedication through her engagement with Black Panther organizing, highlighting how mourning occurs in multifaceted ways and places. Kim's response to King's assassination calls her to arms in order to cope with her grief. The episode reminds us that the pain and fractures of the 1960s are the scars of today, as Dean articulates in the pilot episode:

Suddenly, the anger I was seeing on the news made a little more sense, especially because it felt like some things would never change. Everybody in my family plays that day over and over in their minds. But for different reasons. For each of us, it felt like the world around us had changed forever. (Dean, Episode 1: Pilot)³⁹

³⁷ *The Wonder Years*, "Pilot."

³⁸ *The Wonder Years*, "Pilot."

³⁹ *The Wonder Years*, "Pilot."

For Kim and many others, especially young adults, the world *had* changed forever. The familiar practices of peaceful protest, church organizing, and collective grieving were just one way to meet the moment. Some of the Black feelings at this juncture would dictate a new kind of engagement with political struggle, one evinced also in school halls.

The Classroom

So much of our early lives are shaped by teachers. Outside of our parents, they can be our first role models. They pour so much into us and still, teachers are basically strangers. (Dean, Episode 15: Black Teacher)⁴⁰

The classroom is a rhetorical and cultural site in Black communities and provides media opportunities to center counterhegemonic narratives involving Black children in U.S. schools. For Black American children, the classroom, much like the living room, offers spaces for socialization and the learning of one's culture. The classroom introduces children to shared beliefs, traditions, customs, rewards, and punishments. Students are taught who is important, valued, seen, and, through omission and exclusion, who is not. Too often, classrooms in the 1960s, and in the present-day, become sites of acculturation, enculturation, and indoctrination toward white, Eurocentric thinking, lacking the culturally-relevant pedagogical approaches that critical race educators advocate for in their research.⁴¹ Yet, the classroom offers a unique locale to interrogate connections between affect (emotions), learning, resistance, and memory. For example, as Lisa Corrigan argues in her study of Black political feelings during the Civil Rights era, the critical rhetorical method called "emotional pedagogy" equips critics to examine the ways that the circulation of emotion is central to the production of knowledge.⁴² Such a framework enables a productive reading of affective modes in the classroom, a place where knowledge grows among the characters in the show.

The Wonder Years (2021) enters this rhetorical milieu by contesting dominant (white) public memory about Black educational experiences in the U.S. South during the Civil Rights era by remembering the struggles *and* the affective joys of secondary education. Episode 15 presents a classroom divided: it depicts different types of Black students--those who sit in the front and those who sit in the back--among myriad students (Black and white), while also presenting a dichotomy of pedagogy. On television and in film, Black students' genius has either been identified, nurtured, or challenged by great opportunities or diminished, ignored, or unmentioned. In the dominant (white) public memory, mediated master narratives portray Black men and students from a deficit perspective, unfairly prone to educational failure.⁴³ *The Wonder Years* reboot intervenes in these public myths when it introduces audiences to a young boy using two different frames. The show's bully, Michael, who is portrayed as a large, much older, Black male child, is labeled as unintelli-

⁴⁰ *The Wonder Years*, 15, "Black Teacher," produced by Lee Daniels, aired March 2, 2022, on ABC, <https://www.hulu.com/series/the-wonder-years-dc8c5d8f-6934-461a-8a43-ee645c6f0b0c>.

⁴¹ Arcasia D. James-Galloway, and Tiffany Harris. "We Been Relevant: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Black Women Teachers in Segregated Schools," *Educational Studies* 57, no. 2 (2021): 124-141.

⁴² Lisa Corrigan, *Black Feelings: Race and Affect in the Long Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020) xxix.

⁴³ David Childs, "Socially Constructing Race and History: Exploring Black Identity and Popular Culture in Social Studies Classrooms through Cultural Studies Framework," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 8, no. 2 (2015). See also Carlos Allende González-Velázquez, Karen E. Shackelford, Lauren N. Keller, Cynthia Vinney, and Lawrence M. Drake's "Watching Black Panther with Racially Diverse Youth: Relationships Between Film Viewing, Ethnicity, Ethnic Identity, Empowerment, and Wellbeing," *Review of Communication* 20, no. 3 (2020): 252.

gent and violent—a dangerous media trope for Black men and children. He sits in the back, disrupts class, and is seemingly unengaged; however, the narrative eventually reveals a much more layered story, with his scientific brilliance always being present with the right amount of pedagogical attention and cultural care.⁴⁴

Importantly, episode 15 portrays the historical and necessary, but often fraught, relationship between Black students and Black teachers at predominately white institutions, ultimately producing an affect of Black joy for the students who are positively influenced by their first Black instructor. Dean is troubled by the tension between wanting to fit in with his white counterparts and wanting to be seen, wondering if his Blackness is too much for the classroom. In the scenes that follow, Mr. Brady, the school's first Black teacher, is shown wearing traditional African attire as he compares the storytelling in *The Odyssey* to that of the Yoruba people of West Africa. Dean begins to panic as Mr. Brady demonstrates using the drums while everyone in the class seems to enjoy learning about the culture.⁴⁵ *The Wonder Years* (2021) use these conversations of privilege and prejudice between the children and their Black teacher to not only counter the historical narratives around classroom pedagogy, reparations, and “leveling the playing field” but also to extend the complex intercultural negotiations that both teacher and student experience in those situations. Ultimately, audiences see that the conversations occurring in the classroom are often followed by conversations in the family living room, at the dinner table, and in the churches where social constructs are negotiated and considered. Contesting the dominant (white) mediated public memory that Black youth are typically left to fend for themselves in educational contexts, *The Wonders Years* (2021) offers a nuanced and more historically accurate perspective on this issue for Black middle-class families in the 1960s.

The focus on the students' encounters with their first Black teacher provides an important place for analysis within the hegemonic narratives attending the classroom space. Speaking about their new teacher Mr. Brady, Dean exclaims, “He’s Black?! I wanted to start singing the Negro National Anthem, but I didn’t know the lyrics. I couldn’t believe it. We finally had our first Black teacher in the history of the school.”⁴⁶ James Brown’s popular song begins playing, “I’m Black and I’m Proud” as the two other Black students in class stand with their fists in the air, adorned with black sunglasses and gloves to mimic the protests of the time. After their quick pseudo-demonstration, Brad, Dean’s best friend and a white student, approaches the Black students asking if having a Black teacher was good news for them, suggesting that the new Black teacher will be likely to give special treatment to the Black students. Keisa quickly rebuts this notion, saying that, if this is the case, then it would also imply that Mrs. Anderson, their white English teacher, was likely giving the white students special privileges. For all students, the significance of having a Black teacher is immediately felt, whether they are comfortable with it or not. Dean ponders that “Mr. Brady was already letting us know that he sees us,” reflecting on this new experience of having a teacher, a person in leadership, a person in charge of shaping their minds, seeing and acknowledging his existence and brilliance without provocation.⁴⁷ In the present, this scene functions rhetorically by sending messages of affirmation to Black teachers doing similar work of bringing global Blackness and storytelling into the public schools and to those who are privileged enough to instruct Black youth in the classrooms.

⁴⁴Jerlando F.L. Jackson and James L. Moore III, “Introduction: The African American Male Crisis in Education: A Popular Media Infatuation or Needed Public Policy Response?” *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 7 (2008): 847.

⁴⁵ *The Wonder Years*, “Black Teacher.”

⁴⁶ *The Wonder Years*, “Black Teacher.”

⁴⁷ *The Wonder Years*, “Black Teacher.”

While the class curriculum in this episode was unchanged from Mrs. Anderson's instruction, what was significant was Mr. Brady's culturally-relevant pedagogy for young Black students. Keisa and Cory had previously been asked to play on tennis and basketball teams, but never the Knowledge Bowl team -- a team filled with white students whose high grade point averages matched the Black students. The scene asserts the invisibility of Black brilliance in many spaces, particularly in the early childhood and primary classroom that have often and historically reified race and racial projects.⁴⁸ Given the freshness of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which ruled that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional, the impact of this counterhegemonic narrative is thus implied.

The audience is able to witness Blackness in the student characters as well as in the leadership of their teacher. Such leadership has also been seen in other media examples where the Black classrooms or Black-led principalships are centered. One example set in the 1980s, *Lean On Me* (1989), features Morgan Freeman as a Black principal who simultaneously enforces strictness and seemingly harsh policies, thus making him almost impossible to work with, and displays this male-dominated presence or figure who many argued was needed for these Black children who otherwise would have been silenced, erased, or only given legitimacy by white teachers.⁴⁹ In those instances where Black excellence is seen as an exception rather than the rule, movies like *Lean On Me* and television shows like *The Wonder Years* reboot provide positive, complex, and nuanced examples of the profound impact of Black teachers in Black and non-Black majority cultural and educational sites.

The episode concludes with Mr. Brady leaving the school that at first seemed so pleased to invite his Black body into the space as a signifier of the school's progressive and inclusive racial acts. In the end, the school was prepared only for the body to enter the white space but never to change the space or interrupt its mainstream education with his identity or intelligence.⁵⁰ The school expected Mr. Brady to bend his Blackness in 1968, which is a message that continues to resonate with today's faculty in similar situations outside of their forced DEI faculty training and core values. The juxtaposition of Dean's need to be liked by both his white and Black classmates against Mr. Brady's desire to truly see and include Black students and position them in their earned place on the Knowledge Bowl team depicts the intercultural balance that many Black students and teachers face in their efforts to be fair and true.

Wondering About the Future of *The Wonder Years*—Is This Future in the Past?

By looking B[l]ackward, we observe that *The Wonder Years* reboot constructs a nostalgic Black public memory that constitutes Black American identity for its viewers, using an affect of joy to foster a sense of group belonging. The show accomplishes this feat while also reckoning with racial trauma, past and present. The result is a rhetorical media text that excels in counterhegemonic public discourse. Similar to the ways in which *The Cosby Show* occasionally used its airtime to construct a counterhegemonic representation of upper middle-class Black family life in the 1980s, *The Wonder Years* (2021) invites audiences to understand Black family living in the 1960s not through the rose-colored lens of a whitewashed past, but through the eyes of multiple, nuanced Black characters experiencing historically significant events on their own terms. Using the innocence of a child, *The Wonder Years* (2021) queries and responds to questions of racism, classism,

⁴⁸ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 56.

⁴⁹ *Lean On Me*, directed by John G. Avildsen, United States: Warner Brothers Pictures, 1989, 1:48.

⁵⁰ *The Wonder Years*, "Black Teacher."

and sexism, doing so while maintaining a palatable tone to engage diverse, mass-market audiences. We do not posit that this program is perfect and without critique; instead, we read this media as a contemporary example that counters historical narratives around Black American life in the 1960s that also mirrors many questions plaguing contemporary Black America. Such considerations are made possible by asking audiences to look again, look closer, and to gaze with fresh eyes. Within this process, we are reminded that discovering “what sticks” means attending to the ways that group identity is forged in the fires of competing public narratives about noteworthy events. We observe the emergence of a Black public memory whose chief aim is to foster racially ethical engagement with historical events.

As bell hooks reminds us, to gaze in Blackness and create in opposition is central to our current critique. In *The Oppositional Gaze*, she states that “there is power in looking... and [the] overwhelming longing to look [produces] a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze.”⁵¹ hooks further states that “speaking against the construction of white representations of Blackness is totalizing.”⁵² As the cultural producers of Black counterstories, the creators of *The Wonder Years* (2021) reboot offered an oppositional gaze to the original media text, located multiple nuanced Black stories and perspectives, and curated a middle-class Black experience seasoned with care, colloquies, and culture. In this way, middle-class Black southern life is publicly remembered in a distinct manner--through the prism of Afro-nostalgia. Afro-nostalgia enables the representation of Black joy and mourning, a key affective turn in laying the groundwork for collective solidarity on matters of race/racism. Thus, by looking B[l]ackward, we read *The Wonder Years* (2021) as providing the resources to build long-lasting community bonds among viewers open to counterhegemonic and emotionally moving representations of a past that bears an uncanny resemblance to the present.

⁵¹ hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” 288-302.

⁵² hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” 291.