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GENDER, RACE, AND CLASS IN MEDIA

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60

WORKPLACE DRAMAS, ENSEMBLE CASTS, 1990s STYLE

◆ Donald Bogle

More serious African American characters and situations—which indeed appealed to older, more educated African American viewers—turned up on the hour-long dramatic series of the 1990s: such programs as *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, *Law & Order*, *Homicide: Life on the Streets*, *ER*, *New York Undercover*, *Chicago Hope*, *Brooklyn South*, *Third Watch*, and *The Practice*. (Or HBO's *Oz*.) For the most part, these were well-written, well-directed, and tensely acted programs in which issues of race were sometimes examined. Yet good as the programs were, Black viewers often yearned to know more about the Black characters. In a series like David Kelley's *The Practice*, the Black lawyers Eugene and Rebecca often appeared deracialized; the series rarely commented on race as a factor in their lives. In fact, it dramatized little about their personal lives. Viewers knew that Eugene had a son. But episodes were not developed around Eugene's personal situation until well into the run of the series. At that time, his teenage son Kendall was arrested on a drug charge. Afterward Eugene's ex-wife took him to court, seeking full custody of the boy. The actors on Kelley's series—Steve Harris, Lisa Gay Hamilton, as well as Lisa Nicole

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Carson and Jesse Martin on *Ally McBeal*—were strong enough to create credible characters. But where these characters came from culturally was anybody's guess.

On such series as *Law & Order* and *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, the African American characters were too often confined to the sidelines. The long-running *Law & Order* included Black actor Richard Brooks as assistant district attorney Paul Robinette in its original cast. But only after Brooks, having left the series, returned for a guest appearance did viewers get to see Robinette actually try a case. Apparently in an attempt to appeal more to female viewers, the Robinette character was replaced by a female assistant district attorney in the series' fourth season. Also brought in to play police lieutenant Anita Van Buren was S. Epatha Merkerson, a stage-trained African American actress who had appeared on Broadway in *The Piano Lesson* and in Spike Lee's film *She's Gotta Have It*. Brisk, intelligent, and sensitive, she quickly emerged as one of the more intriguing Black female characters on episodic television.

Many viewers probably waited for "special" episodes that would focus on her. On the episode *Black Tie*, Van Buren had to deal with Detective Mike Logan's discomfort at having a woman in charge. On another, *Competence*, Van Buren briefly moved center stage. While at an ATM machine, she was held up by two teens. Pulling out her revolver, she ended up killing another teen, a mentally handicapped boy. As the case was investigated, her professionalism was questioned within the department. She also had to face the dead boy's mother: one African American woman trying to explain her tragic mistake to another. Merkerson and Black actress Lisa Louise Langford played the scene beautifully, subtly shading it without overdrawn histrionics. But usually Merkerson seemed underused.

"Why am I in a position of authority yet you rarely see me on-screen?" actress Merkerson once complained.¹ "You can

write stories for me without them necessarily being about a Black issue, but it never happens that way." Aware that her Van Buren could always be counted on for counseling and common sense, Merkerson was also conscious of the character's earth mother qualities. "I think that's why Van Buren has been made Black and female," she said, adding that the earth mother was "another role we tend to find ourselves in: 'Come and tell me the problems and I'll help you out.' You know, 'Come sit on Mamma's knee.'"

With its minimalist scripts (sticking mainly to the story at hand with few diversions) and with its use of handheld cameras (early episodes were shot by cinematographer Ernest Dickerson), *Law & Order* had a documentary feel that lifted it above the ranks of general episodic television. To its credit, *Law & Order* was willing to focus on complex racial issues. One episode that examined a case of sexual harassment seemed drawn from the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas headlines. Yet it was dramatized in an unexpected way. Regina Taylor guest-starred as a woman who accused her former boss, now a prominent liberal white city councilman, of having demanded sex in return for a partnership at his law firm. In her courtroom testimony, Taylor's character spoke chillingly of her humiliation. But then the script shrewdly moved from a comment on gender issues in the workplace to racial ones. Still another episode drew on the riots in Brooklyn's Crown Heights. A Black adolescent was killed in a hit-and-run accident. But the Jewish driver of the car was not indicted. Afterward a Black minister (no doubt inspired by New York's Reverend Al Sharpton) led a protest. A riot ensued in which an Italian man, mistaken for the Jewish driver, was killed by a young Black man. The African American lawyer Shambala Green (a recurring character played by Lorraine Toussaint) defended the youth. Ultimately, the episode commented on the once bonded, now strained, relations between the African American and Jewish communities. Another episode, which

focused on the assassination of an African American leader, possibly by an organization fighting for the rights of African Americans, called to mind the assassination of Malcolm X—and the past rumors of the Nation of Islam's involvement. Later in its run, *Law & Order* added African American actor Jesse L. Martin to its cast.

Among the characters on Steven Bochco's *N.Y.P.D. Blue* was the African American police lieutenant Arthur Fancy (James McDaniel). Though the series explored the troubled private lives of its cop heroes, usually little of Fancy's life was dramatized. Generally, Fancy was depicted as a taciturn, exacting, strictly-by-the-book officer who once fired a detective who had an affair with an informant. Co-creator David Milch felt that Fancy was a character "who, by his own account, says he has trained himself not to want things he can't have, which in a way is one of the strategies of Blacks in America."² But Milch was also aware of the limitations of the role. "We knew it would be a feat of acting to sustain such a character over the first episodes, [but] Jimmy is like a Zen actor," said Milch. "He accomplishes an enormous amount with a minimal amount of effort." "[Fancy] has a certain type of sanity the others don't," said actor McDaniel.³ "I can provide exposition the others can't. To a certain extent it's boring stuff, but it's challenging for me as an actor."

But on some sequences, he was featured more prominently as the series sought to examine the feelings of a Black man in a profession considered hostile and unjust to African American men. At one point, a Black character berated Fancy, saying, "You ain't nothing but an Uncle Tom." Fancy himself questioned his role as a Black cop in the police department, especially when he was faced with Officer Andy Sipowicz's racism.

N.Y.P.D. Blue was rather bold in depicting Sipowicz—one of its central characters—as a man who struggled not only with his alcoholism but with his racial attitudes as well. This was best dramatized in an

episode when Sipowicz has a heated confrontation with another Black character. The angry Black man yells at Sipowicz, "I don't have to go anywhere with you. You're dealing with that one nigger in a thousand who knows what you can and cannot do." Sipowicz responds, without thinking, we assume: "I'm dealing with the nigger whose big mouth is responsible for this mess." The scene was written in such a way that many viewers may have felt Sipowicz was provoked into using the word.

Nonetheless, the episode reveals—in a rather self-congratulatory way—the more acceptable responses of other characters. Sipowicz's partner, Bobby Simone (Jimmy Smits), tells him, "I was not comfortable with those words. I am not comfortable with the thoughts behind it. I just want you to understand that." At home, Sipowicz discusses the racial incident that *provoked* him into using the N-word. He asks his wife if she's ever heard him say it. She answers that she hasn't. But she has seen him use certain gestures when talking about African Americans. "It's code," he tells her. "So you don't have to say it." "Don't ever show it to our child," she then says: "Don't teach him to think in that way." Viewers may have felt that Sipowicz was too likable and vulnerable to be a Mark Fuhrman. But upon closer examination, Sipowicz may have more of an affinity to Fuhrman than we'd like to admit.

But for African American viewers, it was more intriguing to watch Fancy's response to Sipowicz. Often without uttering a word of dialogue, McDaniel looked as if he were wearied by the daily accretion of racism he must deal with—or ignore—to get his job done. When he gets into an argument with Sipowicz, he lets it be known that should Sipowicz be removed from the precinct, "They'll send me another like you. Only worse." Then he says, "Maybe you can't handle a Black man being your boss."

On another episode, Sipowicz arrests an innocent African American man in a murder case. Though the man eventually

gets off, Sipowicz is blind to his own bigotry. The episode ended with Fancy taking him to a restaurant in Harlem where Sipowicz is the only white man. When the two talk, Sipowicz says "it doesn't matter" whether or not he is a racist as long as he is fair when he does his job. Fancy says to him, "You're uncomfortable in this restaurant, but imagine how you'd feel if these waiters had badges and guns." Not only does Fancy refute Sipowicz's point of view but he makes him consider how his life would be if he were African American and on the other side of the law. Still, effective as this scene was, it said more about Sipowicz than about Fancy. Though *N.Y.P.D. Blue* frequently featured Black guest stars, it didn't add another Black character—Baldwin Jones, played by Henry Simmons—until its seventh season.

Among *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s strongest assets was African American director Paris Barclay, who won Emmys two years in a row for his work on the series. So, too, was African American writer Kevin Arkadie.

Based on the book *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* by Baltimore *Sun* crime reporter David Simon and executive-produced by Barry Levinson and Tom Fontana, the gritty police show *Homicide* was set in Baltimore. Known for its quirky look and sound—the handheld camera shots, the jump cuts, and the blues or rock music pulsating on the soundtrack—it was a drama less interested in highly developed story lines than in its idiosyncratic characters. The detectives did not so much solve cases as close them. Sometimes a case went from one week to the next. Often justice was ambiguous. On some occasions, the cast of *Law & Order* was brought on as the characters of the two series joined forces to resolve a case. Always the detectives had short fuses, ready to explode not only with the criminals that they sometimes could not bring to justice but with one another as well.

Homicide could boast of three important African American characters, played by actors Yaphet Kotto, Clark Johnson, and

Andre Braugher. Later Giancarlo Esposito and Michael Michele joined the cast. Such African American actors as Erik Todd Dellums, Clayton LeBoeuf, and Al Freeman Jr. also appeared on some episodes in supporting roles. Like *The Defenders* and *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, *Homicide* also featured a number of African Americans in guest roles: James Earl Jones, Lynn Thigpen, Alfre Woodard, Chris Rock, Gloria Reuben, and Melvin Van Peebles. So many African American faces appeared that some critics mistakenly considered *Homicide* a Black show. Never was it situated enough in an African American cultural context to be *that*. But its Black protagonists as well as some of its story lines were startlingly new for television.

Most of the attention was focused on Andre Braugher—"one of television's most thoughtful, deeply realized characters," wrote Caryn James⁴—as the lapsed Catholic detective Frank Pembleton. Critic John Leonard called Braugher "the best actor on series television."⁵ Other critics agreed. Earlier in his career, Braugher had played a cop on *Kojak* during the 1989-90 season. But he had hated the producers' conception of his character as a bed-hopping womanizer. On *Homicide*, Pembleton is a family man who struggles with himself to remain that. Hot-tempered and moody yet philosophical, he's keenly aware of the toll his job has taken on his home life. He's a man who's wound up so tight that we can feel the knot in his stomach. Yet as gifted an actor as Braugher was, he could also overplay his hand. His use of language and his delivery, his movements and his moods themselves, sometimes became almost archly stylized. Even when he uttered intentionally mundane dialogue, Braugher aimed for bravura effects. In turn, he occasionally became a lot of hot brilliant flash; an actor who seemed to enjoy hearing the sound of his own voice; savoring his own dulcet tones. Yet all of those effects, ironically, made him compellingly watchable. Later, Braugher starred in the series *Gideon's Crossing*.

Often overlooked was the sturdy presence of Yaphet Kotto as Lieutenant Al "Gee" Giardello, the half African American, half Italian lieutenant who gave the men their orders and who also understood their weaknesses and their frustrations. Having worked in theater, movies, and television for years, Kotto brought an assured maturity to the part and the series itself; his was the perceptive intelligence in the squad room that held everything together. Kotto also wrote for the series. Clark Johnson as the street-wise Meldrick Lewis contrasted effectively with both Kotto and Braugher.

Homicide's real surprise came in its sixth season with the arrival of actress Michael Michele. Almost everyone wondered how this stunner would make it in the gritty testosterone world of *Homicide*. Previously, Michele had played a pampered rich girl in the glossy nighttime series *Central Park West*. As she gossiped or partied or commiserated with her white friends on that earlier show, as she became involved with the wealthy father of a friend, her character was one of television's most culturally unanchored heroines. Nothing explained how this young Black woman became so entangled in this world of wealth and privilege. (The character didn't even have the basic cultural demarcations of *Dynasty's* Dominique.) Michele seemed as if she had never experienced any crisis more serious than not being able to find the right lip gloss. She also appeared for a season on *New York Undercover*.

When she showed up in *Homicide*, she was still a stunner: tall, angular, and haughty, although not as glamorous. Wisely, the series didn't try to camouflage her looks. It was explained that she was a former beauty queen who has to prove herself to the guys in the homicide unit. Somehow Michele pared herself down to essentials, emerging as a tough, resilient heroine.

Despite its innovations and unusual characters, *Homicide* never had high ratings. It was always more of a critic's favorite than an audience's.

Of these dramatic shows, *New York Undercover* and *ER* had a greater impact with African American viewers. A cop show with a healthy dose of weekly action, *New York Undercover*—created by Dick Wolf and Kevin Arkadie—was one of the rare dramatic series that Fox pitched at African American viewers. Within its traditional formula, its younger hip cop detective heroes, the African American J. C. (Malik Yoba) and the Latino Eddie (Michael DeLorenzo), appealed to a young audience. So too did its use of music (jazz, rap, rhythm and blues), its sexy, fast-paced New York setting, and its cinema verité style. Later joining the cast were Lauren Velez and Tommy Ford (showing off his acting skills in a way that *Martin* didn't permit).

ER's Benton and Boulet: ♦ Making the Most Out of Marginalized Lives

Created by best-selling author Michael Crichton, *ER* was an innovative doctor's series that shot to the top of the ratings, emerging at the end of its first season as the highest-rated new drama in television history. Set in the emergency unit of Chicago's County General Hospital, the series dramatized the experiences of a group of (relatively) young doctors who struggle not only to save lives but to work out their own personal dilemmas. Among the group was the African American surgeon Peter Benton (Eriq La Salle). For Black viewers, Benton quickly became both an exciting and frustrating hero. On the one hand, you had to respect the skills of this hardworking professional, demanding the best of himself and those around him. Seeing Benton (like seeing his predecessor played by Denzel Washington on *St. Elsewhere*), you realized that television images of African American men indeed had inched forward. Yet in an unexpected way, Peter Benton sometimes appeared to embody a familiar 1960s-style

media type: the angry young Black man. Benton was a man with a scowl; a surly sourpuss if ever there was one.

For too long, the series did not explain Benton's tensions and anger; or put them into a context that gave them meaning. As was true of most of these nighttime dramas, *ER* was eager to comment on the lives of the major white characters: the heartthrob Dr. Ross (George Clooney), the sensitive Dr. Greene (Anthony Edwards), the emotionally fragile nurse Hathaway (Julianna Margulies), the young, eager-to-please resident John Carter (Noah Wyle), the earnest physician Dr. Lewis (Sherry Stringfield). Viewers learned about Dr. Ross's relationships with various women, Greene's problems with his lawyer wife, and Hathaway's shaky romance with a physician as well as her once devastating relationship with Dr. Ross. Those characters also frequently befriended each other. Yet except for his relationship with the resident under his supervision, Carter, who idolized him and was almost desperate to please him, Benton was left isolated. With Benton and Carter, *ER* wisely refused to go the bonding route. It was altogether realistic that the Black Benton might not care to develop a personal relationship with a white colleague. But there was no one at the hospital that he seemed close to. When African American actresses like C. C. H. Pounder and the striking Tyra Ferrell made guest appearances as physicians, you hoped Benton might express his feelings about being the only African American doctor on the *ER* team; perhaps then we'd understand the source of his anger or alienation. But no such thing happened. He remained as removed from them as from everyone else. Where did this man go after he left the hospital?

A semblance of a home life was created for Benton when that great marvel of an actress Beah Richards appeared in various episodes as his elderly mother. As the warm and even-tempered mother, who was revealed to be suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Richards created a stunning por-

trait of a woman fearful of losing control over not only her life but her very sense of identity. Together, Benton and his sister (Khandi Alexander) were faced with the painful decision to put their mother into a nursing home. At the end of that episode, Benton was seen massaging his mother's feet while looking over a family photo album. "Your talent is God's gift to you," Richards tells him. "What you do with it is your gift back to God." It was a beautiful moment. But the scene said more about the mother than the son. Ving Rhames also appeared as Benton's brother-in-law Walter. Yet even with his family Benton was still a cipher.

Eventually, *ER* gave Benton a love life. He first became involved with his mother's caretaker, a married woman, Jeanie Boulet (Gloria Reuben). In his intimate scenes with Boulet, La Salle's Benton remained remote, frustrating viewers all the more. Whereas the sadness and disillusionment in actor George Clooney's eyes had lifted his Dr. Ross womanizer character out of a one-dimensional cad category (the writers seemed to write with Clooney, the man, in mind to create a fully dimensional, engaging hero), La Salle appeared unable to infuse a flat character with some personal warmth or idiosyncrasies. "Benton is probably the most misunderstood [character]," wrote *Jet*, "as he rarely allows his wall of defense to come down."⁶

Later the writers created two other romances for Benton: first with Carla (Lisa Nicole Carson), with whom he has a son, Reese, but to whom he cannot commit; then an interracial affair with a British doctor, Elizabeth Corday (Alex Kingston). Significantly, Corday pursues him, trying her best to get him to let his guard down. But he's still a stiff. His most spontaneous moment came on a Halloween episode. During the closing segment, viewers saw Benton dressed as movie hero Shaft (with Isaac Hayes's music in the background). It provided the Benton character with a great cultural reference (which otherwise was usually missing).

In the third season, an episode of *ER* finally commented on the subject that many African American viewers were most curious about: Benton's feelings about race. A young African American intern at the hospital, Dennis Gant (Omar Epps), wants very much to connect to Benton. But Benton is always tough on him (as much so as he was with Carter). Finally, in a telling sequence, when the two are alone, Gant confronts Benton. Benton asks if Gant checked "Black" on his medical school application. When Gant replies yes, Benton informs him that everyone will assume Gant is there because of a quota system, not because of merit. Therefore Gant must work harder and be better to prove them wrong. It was one of the rare times when viewers felt they had been given some concrete comment on Benton's feelings of (racial) isolation as the only African American doctor on the *ER* staff. In time, Benton's one-note remoteness became, to put it politely, uninteresting.

Later the writers tried softening the Benton character as he struggled to accept his young son's deafness. But it wasn't a particularly engrossing plot development. In the fifth season, an entire episode of *ER* was devoted to Benton. When asked during an appearance on *The Today Show* why it had taken so long for a special episode on Benton, actor La Salle answered, "I don't know. You'd have to ask the producers. They've done it with every original member of the cast. They've actually done it multiple times. For five years, I said, 'Okay, guys, I'm on the show as well.'" La Salle admitted he had to put his foot down. "I think it was a bit unfortunate that it gets to that level. But I think it's really about that this is an ensemble show. And the word 'ensemble' implies fair treatment and equality. I think we're here. And it's a great challenge. I'm definitely glad and pleased with the show. But it was a struggle."

To his credit, La Salle also voiced his other concerns about *ER*. "As an African American man, it becomes a bit offensive if the negative things are all you're showing,"⁷

he said. "Because in real life we romance and get on each other's nerves and laugh and do all the things that any other race of people do." He urged the writers to drop the romantic story line between Benton and the white Corday. "So if the only time you show a balanced relationship is in an interracial relationship whether it's conscious or subconscious, it sends a message I'm not comfortable with. [The writers] were sending a message that I didn't want to be a part of, which was the only time that this man becomes human and tender and vulnerable and open is when he falls in love with a white woman." He added that his relationships with African American women on the series had been dysfunctional. "One was an adulterous relationship with Jeanie Boulet and then the next relationship I got into was with Carla. And unfortunately the writing there was, every time you see them they're either fighting or [having sex]." The writers dropped the Benton/Corday story line. Later a romance was developed for Benton and a new character, Dr. Cleo Finch, played by African American actress Michael Michele.

Like *Hill Street Blues*, *ER* sometimes fell back on familiar, even stock characterizations of urban African Americans. On one episode, two young Black men were brought into the emergency room, each with gunshot wounds. Two young Black women—who visit the men—argue and get into a shoving match. They are asked to leave the room. But in the hospital corridor they begin to fight and are told to get out of the hospital or the police and security will be called. Later one of the women is brought back to the hospital with stab wounds, apparently having been attacked by the other woman. On another episode, Carter ends up in the inner city, where he stumbles across two Black children sitting on a doorstep outside a doorway. He walks inside the house to find their tubercular mother breathing heavily. As he attempts to help, a Black man suddenly appears, demanding to know what Carter is doing in his home. Though Carter says he only wants

to help the woman get medical treatment, the man—irrationally—insists that he leave.

During the fifth season, new cast members Djimon Hounsou and Akosua Busia played a married West African couple who are political refugees from Nigeria, where Hounsou was tortured. He's a janitor at the hospital; she works in the cafeteria's food service. One day she confides in the nurse Hathaway that she was raped while in Nigeria but thus far she has been unable to tell her husband. She fears his reaction. Later she ends up with a knife wound to the chest and wheeled into the emergency room on a gurney. We learn that her husband "freaked out" and we assume he attacked her. Though this story line later had a surprising twist, you wonder why all these episodes relied on a continuing depiction of a world of crime or violence for these Black characters.

Despite its shortcomings, *ER* reached a segment of the African American community. Part of the appeal was that *ER* also developed a fine lineup of Black supporting players: Yvette Freeman as nurse Haleh Adams; Deezer D. as nurse Malik McGrath; Conni Marie Brazelton as nurse Conni Oligario; guest star C. C. H. Pounder as Dr. Angela Hicks. Freeman with her short Afro, Brazelton with her dreads, Pounder with her traditional coif all provided the workplace with an interesting visual comment on the various styles and looks of African American women.

Certainly, the most moving story line for an African American woman centered on Jeanie Boulet. Married to a man who has cheated on her, she ends up briefly in the arms of Benton. Later working as a physician's assistant, Jeanie solemnly walks through the corridors, hallways, and elevators of the hospital, always ready to help others. Jeanie's story attained a distinct emotional power when she learned that she was HIV-positive. Fearful of losing her job, she keeps her condition a secret. There was some grumbling that *ER*'s depiction of an

HIV-positive Black character was a negative comment on the African American community, especially since she contracted the disease from her husband, a promiscuous Black man. But the Black characters on *ER*, like the white ones, had to have problems, great and small. AIDS was a real problem within the African American and Latino communities, and *ER* neither sensationalized nor exploited the subject. Yet television's one prime-time weekly African American heroine—who was mature, sophisticated, and sexual—looked as if she might disappear.

Though Glòria Reuben was not an especially expressive actress (with her flat voice, she spoke almost in a monotone), her passivity and melancholic air worked beautifully for the character. Some of the most affecting moments of the television season were those when the camera came in close to record Reuben/Jeanie's despair. You felt you were losing something special, right before your eyes. You dreaded seeing her die. Then the writers did an unexpected thing. They let the character live with her disease. Eventually, little was said about her condition. Then, without much fanfare, the character married and was written out of the series. But no viewer ever forgot Boulet.

Despite the limitations of the hour-long dramatic ensemble series, these remained the only weekly programs that African Americans could turn to for serious, mature Black characters. Such dramatic Black series as *Under One Roof*, Thomas Carter's multigenerational family story, and *413 Hope Street*, executive-produced by Damon Wayans, disappeared quickly from the prime-time schedule. Set in a crisis center with a mixed but predominantly Black cast, *413 Hope Street* had promise. It scored well with Black viewers, becoming their third most watched show. But when *413 Hope Street* failed to bring in the big ratings, Fox, rather than giving the series time to find a broader audience, dropped it. Black dramatic series still could not survive on the prime-time schedule.

♦ Notes

1. Why am I in: Kevin Courrier and Susan Green, *Law & Order: The Unofficial Companion* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1998).

2. who, by his own: Verne Gay, "A Patient 'Blues' Man," *New York Newsday*, April 5, 1994.

3. [Fancy] has a certain: Ibid.

4. one of television's most: Caryn James, "Critic's Choice/Television: Officer's Last

Harangue," *The New York Times*, May 8, 1998.

5. the best actor on: John Leonard, "Television: Swept Away," *New York*, June 10, 1996.

6. Benton is probably the: "Eriq La Salle and Gloria Reuben Help Make 'ER' a Top-Rated TV Series," *Jet*, February 17, 1997.

7. As an African American: Michael Starr, "Why the Romance Went Out of 'ER,'" *New York Post*, April 14, 1999.

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