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MEDIA REVIEW

BEL-AIR AND THE CARCERAL SYSTEM

Bel-Air (forthcoming), M. Cooper (dir.) and W. Smith (prod.), USA: Peacock.

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> In a matter of time I spent on some locked-up shit
> In the back of the paddy wagon, cuffs locked on wrists
> See my dreams unfold, nightmares come true
> It was time to marry the game, and I said, 'Yeah, I do'.
>
> (Mill, 'Dreams and Nightmares')

In the first episode of *Bel-Air*, Morgan Cooper's dramatic reimagining of the iconic 1990s sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, the Banks children – Hillary, Carlton and Ashley – gather in a game room inside their mansion and prepare to be paraded in front of a gathering of donors. Phil, their father, is running for district attorney, and Will, their cousin, has just shown up from Philadelphia for reasons that remain mysterious to the trio. The scene hints at the tension that will energize the first season as the family learns how to adjust to their new arrival while navigating intense public scrutiny. Carlton, ostensibly commenting on a photo op but also offering up what he thinks is the shield that will cover them all, notes, '[w]hat could go wrong with a photo op with us in it? I mean, look at us: pure, unadulterated Black excellence'.

Out at the fundraiser, Phil narrows the focus of the show's tension as he echoes Fannie Lou Hamer: 'I'm tired, folks. I'm tired of watching this broken system discard young Black men […] and if I am elected DA, I will stop at nothing to ensure that justice prevails'. What we in the audience (and a select few at the fundraiser) already know is that the previous day, Phil had phoned in a favour and skirted some ethics to spring Will from jail and help him skip out on gun charges. And what Phil is banking on is that his and his family's excellence can propel him into a position to help others in Will's predicament in a more formal and above-board fashion. The tension that *Bel-Air* Season

1 stretches to its breaking point is a consideration of whether Black excellence can provide protection from a broken system.

Carlton's definition of 'Black excellence' in the season premiere is undoubtedly rooted in notions of class and upward mobility. His parents come from West Philadelphia and rural North Carolina, and they are, on the surface, the picture of the American dream: they worked hard and got super rich. The Banks family are the Obamas, Oprah, the Carter-Knowles family, not just succeeding but *ex*ceeding what they are supposed to be able to achieve in an anti-Black capitalist society. Phil's ability to get Will out of jail and out to Los Angeles is in part the result of his class privilege. His money and his proximity to political power seemingly allow Will to escape a system that wanted to discard him, and the rest of Phil's DA campaign is premised on the idea that his class – a combination of wealth and power – will gain him access to the inner workings of a system whose racism he can fix from the inside. Here, though, the Banks family's wealth turns out to be fool's gold.

In the 1994 open letter 'No humans involved' (a shorter version of the letter ran in 1992), Sylvia Wynter dissects how the acronym 'no humans involved' came to exist in the LAPD's description of 'a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettoes' (Wynter 1994: 42). Wynter traces how race and class work together in the post-Civil Rights United States to explain how the United States came to impose a subhuman status not just along racial lines anymore (as during slavery and Jim Crow eras) but according to race *and* class categories. It is a tricky calculus that means a Black family like Phil's can move further from the crosshairs of racist institutions like the US justice system (and that some poor white folks are more likely to get ensnared in unjust institutions), even as those crosshairs sharpen their focus on jobless Black people. 'Indeed', Wynter notes,

> It may be said that it is this category of the jobless young Black males who have been made to pay the 'sacrificial costs' (in the terms of Rene Girard's *The Scapegoat*, 1968) for the relatively improved conditions since the 1960's that have impelled many Black Americans out of the ghettoes and into the suburbs; that made possible therefore the universal acclamation for the Cosby-Huxtable TV family who proved that *some* Black Americans could aspire to, and even be, drawn inside, the 'sanctified category' of Americans *just like us*.
>
> (Wynter 1994: 46, original emphasis)

Though Wynter chose to namecheck the Huxtables instead of turning the TV dial to another sanctified Black family, the Bankses certainly fit the bill of what she describes here.

While Phil and Vivian – and Will's mother Vy – hope they can use the Banks's class privilege to deliver Will from the justice system's crosshairs, Wynter frames a much more complex narrative. For Wynter, the system turns its eyes from the Banks's Black excellence – their upward mobility – *so that* it can intensify its harassment of Will. In other words, the system is not, as Phil has diagnosed, broken; it is working exactly as it is supposed to. So when Phil starts meddling with that system's purpose, whether by interfering in Will's arrest and oncoming prosecution or by telling the audience at a campaign rally that he wants to defund the police, he finds himself in those same crosshairs. In the season's penultimate episode, Phil must withdraw from the DA

race and throw his support behind the chief of police because the judge who helped him spring Will from jail outs him; he would rather cut off his nose to spite Phil's face than risk seeing the system dismantled.

Season 1 of *Bel-Air* engages the justice system with complexity and nuance, demonstrating how the Banks family's Black excellence can, on the one hand, shield them from some of the most vicious outbursts of the justice system while, on the other hand, never provide enough cover from the crosshairs that were trained on Will and now have captured his family in its sites, too. The first episode and first season are aptly framed by Meek Mill's 'Dreams and Nightmares', in which Mill chronicles his extra-legal come up. The season ends with Will and his friend Jazz gazing contemplatively out over the LA skyline and fades to the credit screen as Mill tells of the moment when the cuffs of the police married him to the game. *Bel-Air* had a two-season order from the jump, so there are undoubtedly brighter days ahead in future episodes, but the first season raises a sceptical eyebrow to the question of whether Black excellence can outrun an unjust system – especially when that system is functioning exactly as it is designed to. As we look at Will and Jazz looking out over LA, we are dropped into an inter-season lacuna without achieving resolution to the characters' problems at hand. Instead, we are left to imagine how we might resolve that tension, how we might turn nightmares into dreams, how we might channel an abolitionist impulse and, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, *Change Everything*.

REFERENCES

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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